

Edna St. Vincent Millay: The Woman
and the Poet

by

Lois Patricia Forster

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Thesis

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY: THE WOMAN AND THE POET

by

Lois Patricia Forster
(A.B., Boston University, 1942)
submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
1943



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for

Approved
by

First Reader.....

Professor of English

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Professor of English

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by

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President of the Board

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Chapter V: Evaluation

Chapter I: Edna St. Vincent Millay, The Woman

In this analytical age, people are not content to love poetry for itself alone. Today pure aesthetics yield to a very human urge--curiosity. Readers want to know the person who wrote the poetry--not just his name, but all about him. They poke eagerly into the personal facts of his life, seizing with delight on every incident that might "explain" the poetry. The poems themselves seem to hold no meaning for them unless they are traceable to some event in the author's life, some stated attitude or early love affair. This tendency has been carried to regrettable extremes. True, personalities are interesting. True, there is nothing wrong with our wanting to become acquainted with a fine poet. But this interest should never be allowed to interfere with our appreciation of the poetry itself. That stands alone, and we should love the beautiful in it because it is beautiful, not because we have discovered a juicy bit of information that gives it "biographical significance". In reading poetry, "We need but take pleasure in it, all the pleasure, delight, happiness that it has to bestow, and that we are capable of receiving." (1)

That urge to know the person, however, cannot be denied, and to a moderate extent is justifiable. Anyone who reads

1. Ten Modern Poets, Rica Brenner
Harcourt and Brace, 1930
Preface by Walter De La Mare

In this analysis, we find that the poet is not content to love
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Miss Millay's poetry must, as a matter of human nature, want to know her. She writes in such an intensely personal vein that in some people it might be called an invitation to acquaintance. In her case, though, challenge is a better word, for Miss Millay has shown a strong reluctance to lay her private life open to public view. It is as though she could not help expressing herself, poetically, but having done so, she must take every precaution to keep the public from proving that any one poem is a direct expression of her feelings.

This is not due to shyness, surely. The author of A Few Figs From Thistles and Fatal Interview could not be called shy. Nor can I believe that it is due to snobbishness. There is nothing of the smugly superior in her poems. She names herself

"Child of all mothers, native of the earth", and one senses a real democracy in her love of the earthy and the commonplace. Yet she is an individual, and she values highly her individuality. From the start she refused to have her life stripped bare and exposed to misinterpretation and lifted eyebrows from people who were too small to understand the unconventional. Her sense of dignity and pride and her integrity to her own standards made her insist on respect. Let us take her on her own terms.

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Accepting these terms, let us smother any desire to pry into the secrets of her life, and take the few facts she has given us as an outline. Then let us read and re-read her poetry, primarily for the pure enjoyment of it, and secondarily because through it we may come to know the woman who wrote it--and she is a charming and fascinating person, worth knowing.

First of all, what are the accepted biographical facts? There are not many. Few people have even attempted to write the **story** of her life. Their data have come from her, and as a result their theories may disagree, but their basic facts agree.

Edna St. Vincent Millay was born February 22, 1892, in Rockland, Maine. She was the first of three girls. Striking evidence of how little is known about her is the fact that the names of these girls is not even given by Elizabeth Atkins, Harold Lewis Cook, Rica Brenner, or any of her major biographers. From the biography of the novelist, Kathleen Millay, we learn that she is one of the sisters--not because she claimed the relationship, but because she was born of the same parents.

Miss Millay was quite young when the family moved to Camden, Maine, where she had the greater part of her schooling. Most of her time was spent on or in the waters of

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Miss Willey was quite young when she finally moved to
Garden, Maine, where she had the greater part of her school-
ing. Most of her time was spent on or in the waters of

Penobscot Bay. She led a tomboy's life, and was known to the neighbors as Vincent Millay.

When she was twelve her mother obtained a divorce. After that her mother supported the family by practical nursing. They were poor financially, but rich in spirit. Jerome Beatty, after an interview in 1932, quotes her as saying "We always had a piano and music and books and pretty clothes--always. But we sometimes had no food. In the winter-time, when people were ill, we got along splendidly. But in healthy times, although we sang merrily and always looked quite spic-and-span, we often were hungry. But we never minded that. We never knew that everything would come out all right. And it always does." (1)

Undoubtedly Jerome Beatty embroidered Miss Millay's statement a bit to please the romantic readers of The American. I see no reason for discrediting it completely, however. Other sources tell us that she was poor, yet her poetry does not reflect the poverty of her childhood, but the wealth of it. It is quite reasonable to believe that her mother taught her to love the beauty in her life and ignore the discomfort.

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1. Beatty, Jerome-" 'Best Sellers' in Verse: the story of Millay", "The American", January, 1932 p. 102

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J. Beatty, Gerome-"Best Girl" in Verse: the story of
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started to work on "Renaissance", which was published in The Lyric Year in 1912, "and at the age of twenty she found herself famous among critics. Not yet had the general public discovered her."(1)

A wealthy friend, who has always remained anonymous, was deeply impressed with "Renaissance", and with Vincent herself. She sent her to Vassar in 1914 for four years. There, through no wish of her own to be different, she led a life somewhat apart from her class-mates. She was older than most of them, twenty-one when she entered. Also, she was far more mature in her thoughts. Since she didn't have the pretty clothes or the social background for constant dating, her main interests were in her studies. Her attentions were not given indiscriminately. She loved Latin, had loved it since she was first introduced to it in High School. She loved music and literature and drama. These things she studied with enthusiasm. The things she did not like, she ignored. As a result, she was never listed as an honor student.

Her love of music was partially responsible for the rather surprising incident of her expulsion in her Senior year. She overstayed her Easter vacation two days to hear Caruso sing in "Aida", cheerfully forfeiting her major privileges for the rest of the year to pay for it. This meant, mainly, that she could not leave the campus overnight.

1. See note 1., page 4

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In May she went driving with a friend, a minister's daughter, and went home with her for dinner. The evening passed so pleasantly that she lost track of time, and missed the last ferry. She slipped in unobserved the next morning, but her floor-warden discovered her "crime" through an unfortunate coincidence, and informed the college authorities. As a result, she was denied the privilege of graduating with her class, expelled from the campus, and told that she would receive her diploma by mail. Then she discovered how many friends she had made. They sent petitions and personal delegates to the President. At the last minute she received a telegram (she had gone to New York) telling her to come back. She might have rebelled, but her patroness wanted to see her graduate, so she went back. She did not bear a grudge against her Alma Mater; but it must have pleased her to go back a few years later to read her poetry to breathless college girls in the auditorium from which she had once been barred.

From Vassar she went, with her mother, to Greenwich Village. There she became a spokesman for her group, a leader in the expression of liberal thinking and rebellion against convention that swept the youth of the country as a post-war reaction. The Millays were still poor, and they lived mainly on the income from the short stories that

Vincent wrote and sold under the pseudonym of Nancy Boyd.

She acted a while with the Provincetown Players, went to France on an impulse and very little money, and ventured into drama. In 1921 she wrote The Lamp and the Bell for a Vassar celebration, and shortly after she wrote her now-famous war satire, Aria Da Capo.

In 1922 she published A Few Figs From Thistles. This book won her fame and fans among her contemporaries, if not the admiration of the critics. Later that year she published Second April, which won her wider and a more deserved popularity.

1923 was an important year in her life. She received the Pulitzer Prize for her ballad, "The Harp Weaver", and she married Eugen Jan Boissevain. Her husband was wealthy, and a lover of the arts. He adored Vincent and was convinced of the greatness of her poetry. He has done everything possible to encourage her and aid her, putting her work before all else. After a round-the-world honeymoon lasting a year, they went to live at "Steepletop", their home in Austerlitz, N.Y., where they have lived ever since.

In 1927 she was moved by the injustice of ^{the} Sacco-Vanzetti trial to break the seclusion she had enjoyed since her marriage. She joined a picket line, had an interview with the governor, and sent him a passionate letter of protest - all to

no avail. After the execution she wrote several poems on the theme, two sonnets dedicated to the two victims, and two lyrics, "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" and "Hangman's Oak".

She was invited in 1926 to collaborate with Deems Taylor on an American Opera. He wrote the music and she wrote the words to The King's Henchman. In 1928 she published The Buck in The Snow, containing the famous "Justice Denied in Massachusetts".

Aside from her activities in the Sacco-Vanzetti trial she has lived quietly at "Steepletop", avoiding reporters and publicity. Once a year she and her husband ~~went~~^{go} to Maine, and in the late '30s she bought an island in Maine.

Early in 1931 she published Fatal Interview. Later that same year, her mother died. This was a real loss. They had always been in close sympathy.

The second World War has stirred her to what is known as her "propaganda" poetry. Wine From These Grapes, in 1933, contained the sonnet sequence, "Epitaph For the Race of Man." Conversation at Midnight, in 1937, showed a new interest in political and religious discussion. Huntsman, What Quarry?, 1939, had a number of war-inspired poems in Part II. Make Bright The Arrows, 1940, was wholly concerned with her reaction to the War, and "Murder of Lidice", 1941, was pure propaganda.

There is the outline, and a scanty one it is. She has not given us any intimate stories about childhood escapades or young love affairs. There is nothing about her family, her hobbies, her favorite foods or her political beliefs. We may regret this, but we cannot change it. In order to see the vivid and delightful personality of Edna St. Vincent Millay herself, we must read her poetry.

As we read her books in chronological order, we discover, first of all, that she is sensitive and perceptive. As a girl she loved life with a passionate exultation. She loved the simple, primitive beauties of Maine - the sea, the rocks, the woods, the farms. It may not have been a conscious love, at the time, but it was real and deep, so deep that it permeated her life and colored her poetry for years to come.

She loved the beautiful in literature, too. She read, because she wanted to, Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans, and the English classics. Her poetry is rich with references to the classics, and often she writes in the actual spirit and atmosphere of the Elizabethans.

She has always been a lover of truth, justice, and freedom. Her writing, though properly called feminine and emotional, had from the beginning a forthrightness and candor that was quite new in women. She wrote directly, frankly, and with humor. She didn't laugh at others, but in reading many

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of her poems we get the impression that she had a quizzical, self-mocking smile on her lips as she wrote.

Characteristic of her early writing was rebellion against narrow conventionality. Beatty offers an explanation for this: "Surrounded throughout her youth by neighbors who lived in a constant state of 'Thou Shalt Not', encouraged by her liberal mother to think for herself and to say what she thought, Vincent there began to develop that rebellion against tabooism which has made her poetry so popular."⁽¹⁾ Again the statement is dramatized, but basically reasonable.

As has been said, it has always been important to her that she retain her individuality. What she thinks and feels is important to her, and she assumes, almost with arrogance, that it is important to others, too. Therefore she writes with a cool assurance and clarity.

As we read the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay, then, we benefit in a two-fold manner. We come to know a charming and fascinating woman, and we become familiar with the work of a true artist.

1. Beatty, Jerome (see page 4)

Chapter II: Her First Period

Renaissance, A Few Figs From Thistles, Second April,
The Harp-Weaver, and Three Plays

No artist works on a consistently high plane, and there are many degrees of art. Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote some very poor poetry--but she also wrote some very great poetry. Her mediocre work, which includes the bulk of her writing, is better than the best of many poets.

Two words have been used more than any others to describe Miss Millay's early writing--feminine and emotional. Critics have used these two adjectives as if they automatically cancelled the worth of the poetry. Edd Winfield Parks explained it, somewhat sadly: "Until she reached the age of thirty-five, Edna St. Vincent Millay seemed an almost perfect example of this belief[that a woman is governed by emotion]; her poetry was intimate rather than intellectual, realistic rather than philosophical, and inconstant to an extreme. In brief, feminine. True, she occasionally exhibited remarkable insight into the problem of life, the miracle of death, but even these strengthened the conception: they seemed lightning-clarifying flashes of that intuition so freely granted to women, but behind them no philosophy of life, nor even a sustained intellectual curiosity."(1)

1. Parks, Edd Winfield--"Edna St. Vincent Millay"
"Sewanee-Review", Jan-Mar 1930, p. 43

Granted that this were perfectly true, which I do not, I cannot feel that it was as unfortunate as Mr. Parks seemed to. A poetry that is "intimate", "realistic", and shows "lightning-clarifying flashes of intuition" has a very definite value. However, I believe that she did show philosophy and intellectual curiosity. More and more, through the years, her work revealed a deep and compelling curiosity about the meanings of life, death, beauty, and even love.

Moreover, art deals with the revelation of human character, which I assume includes feminine character. Certainly Miss Millay has shown an unerring instinct for revealing bits of the feminine mind and heart. This in itself may not make great poetry, but it certainly makes good poetry, too good to be scorned. A great many of her admirers claim that her early work was her best work, and regret that she ever grew up in her writing. What were the qualities that made those early poems so popular?

In 1912 there was a literary rebellion against the platitudes and sweetness of Victorian poetry that expressed itself in the "new poetry". In that year Harriet Monroe first published the magazine "Poetry". Eager young writers followed Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell into experiments with Imagism and vers libre. The new forms left many readers confused and uncertain. These readers had become bored with the old poetry, but they were often repelled by the new. Into this

world, in 1912, came Edna St. Vincent Millay's "Renaissance", and in 1917 it was published in a slim black volume called Renaissance and other Poems. Her admirers were few at first--only the ones who had not pledged themselves to the experimentalists. Critics received with high approval, however, this slender volume which contained so much of youthful joie de vivre, sincerity, and simplicity. Here was a poet who did not attempt to use new forms, yet her poetry had a delightful freshness and modernity. The optimism of her first book, with its certainty that all was for the best, was refreshing in the chaos of a war-torn world. True, there were undertones of sadness and recognition of death, but there wasn't the stark despair that sounded in the works of so many of her contemporaries. "Interim" told a sad story, and told it with a beautiful poignancy, yet it left you feeling calm. Perhaps this was because "Interim" was not, as has been believed by many, a record of personal loss, but an imaginative piece written from observation of other people's sufferings. (1)

Far more impressive, because they rang so much more truly, were the exuberant, exultant "Renaissance" and "God's World", and the quietly philosophical sonnet, "Mindful of you the sodden earth in Spring", with the assurance of its last lines:

"But you were something more than young and sweet
And fair--and the long year remembers you."

1. Foot-note in the essay "Edna St. Vincent Millay" by Harold Lewis Cook, found in the "Bibliography of the works of Millay" by Karl Yost. Harper's, 1937.

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sober earth is dying", with the awareness of the last lines:

"But you were something more than young and sweet
And still the long years remember you."

1. Foot-note in the essay "Some St. Vincent Millay" by
Reynolds Lewis Cook, found in the "Bibliography of the works
of Millay" by Carl Follen. Harper's, 1937.

That first book sang triumphantly the joys of just being alive. Written when she was in High School and in Vassar, it shows what a keenly perceptive child and youth Vincent was. Even then she saw the primary values of life in the simple beauties of her own world. In "Renaissance", having been pressed into the grave by the weight of the world's sorrows, she is stirred by the loveliness of the apple orchard in the Spring rain to a passionate desire to return to earth.

She was sensitive to sorrow and grief, as is shown by such poems as "Interim", "Sorrow", and "Three Songs of Shattering". Those poems were the result of imagination and a youthful tendency to ally oneself with sorrow, and suffer vicariously and dramatically. A more healthy tendency, to my way of thinking, was her love of fantasy. Hers was an active imagination, that moved with quick certainty in the field of the unusual, the impossible. She saw things in odd and lovely forms, strangely different, yet, when she put them in words, emphatic of their own most distinctive qualities.

"Renaissance" is the best example of this, but there are touches of it in "Suicide", "The Little Ghost", "The Shroud", "Witch-Wife", and many others. We see it in some of her very effective phrases:

"the creaking of the tented sky"

"the big rain in one black wave"

"the grass, a-tip-toe at my ear"

"When its slack syllables tighten to a thought"

and

"She learned her hands in a fairy-tale,
And her mouth on a valentine."

Even if I had not known that she studied music, I should have sensed that she loved it. She makes no direct references to it in her first book, but there are passages that simply would not have occurred to one who was not familiar with musical terms. Such phrases as:

"the far-off rush
Of herald wings came whispering
Like music down the vibrant string
Of my ascending prayer--"

"So short a time
To teach my life its transposition to
This difficult and unaccustomed key!"

and

"A Fear that in the deep night starts awake
Perpetually, to find its senses strained
Against the taut strings of the quivering air
Awaiting the return of some dread chord."

There are factors in her poetry that we call "modern", not because they have never existed before, but because their open expression is characteristic of the twentieth century. There is the quality of directness, for example. Vincent insisted on telling the truth, as she saw it, even when it was damaging to her own pride. Harriet Monroe praised this effusively: "Always one feels the poet's complete and unabashed sincerity. She says neither the expected thing, nor the 'daring' thing, but the incisive, true thing as she has discovered it and feels it." (1)

1. Monroe, Harriet--"Comment on Edna St. Vincent Millay"
Poetry, August, 1924 p. 262

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John Preston, on the same point, says: "A lover of light and clarity, Miss Millay, with the instinct of the true poet, will allow nothing to come between her and her honest expression." (1)

There are drawbacks to this. For one thing, she spoke with such convincing assurance that one automatically believed her--and sometimes she was wrong. The sincerity of "Renaissance" was splendid. It dared to be proud of beauty in an age of cynicism and bitterness, and it was like a sadly-needed tonic to confused and doubting minds. But this frankness took on at times a confessional quality that led to weakness. She was saved from the morbid and the maudlin, first by her sense of humor, and later by her hard-earned understanding and resignation to the inevitable. Her technique of self-analysis, however, has led others to a flood of writing for which we can't thank her at all. Too numerous and too trivial to be remembered as individuals were the many girls of the Oh-God-the-pain school, who did their best to clutter up the literary horizon with their neurotic efforts. (2)

A more worthy characteristic was that desire for individuality mentioned before. The best early expression of it is in "Bluebeard", the last sonnet in her first book:

1.) Preston, John Hyde--"Edna St. Vincent Millay" p. 345
"Virginia Quarterly Review", July, 1927

2.) Atkins, Elizabeth--Edna St. Vincent Millay and her Times
University of Chicago Press 1936
p. 30

"Look yet again--
 An empty room, cobwebbed and comfortless.
 Yet this alone out of my life I kept
 Unto myself, lest any know me quite;
 And you did so profane me when you crept
 Unto the threshold of this room tonight
 That I must never more behold your face.
 This now is yours. I seek another place."

The things that Thomas Chubb said in 1938 about "Renas-
 cence" the poem can be applied as well to Renaissance the book:
 "A kind of earthy, rather than heaven-soaring lyricism, based
 on plain images, based on country images of the most homely
 sort, and what is even more incredible, based on simple humor.
 Humor is a great rarity among lyric poets. With a kind of
 snub-nosed, almost freckled honesty, the little girl, nearly
 into womanhood, stands right at the shoulder of the immortal
 poet. She hardly vanishes until Fatal Interview. Integrity,
 clarity of vision--an amazingly healthy clarity so that she
 is in no way deluded but she is not disillusioned either--
 and, last of all, a definite courage...And, of course, over
 and above all, instrumenting each one of these qualities so
 as to make it realizable, the gift of writing. "Renaissance"
 taught us what we have never had to unlearn--that Miss Millay
 can write well. She can write clearly, supply, lucidly,
 vividly and effectively."(1)

Her second book, A Few Figs From Thistles, caused a great
 deal of controversial criticism. Some condemned it for being

1. Chubb, Thomas C.--"Shelley Grown Old"
 "North American Review", Spring 1938 p. 174

flippant and vulgar; others praised it for its candor and wit. As art, it is disappointing, to be sure. There is nothing in it to equal "Renaissance" or "God's World". But in several ways the book is one of her most important.

It's an expression of her own development. Vincent Millay was a liberal and a free thinker, back there in 1922. Later on these qualities were to be expressed in worthier ways, but the first signs of it showed in a rebellion against the binding conventions of a man's world. She resented the fact that men loved lightly and left broken-hearted women to grieve in silence, but expected only constancy and faithfulness from these women in return. She claimed, for all women, the right to love as passionately, as outspokenly, and as briefly as men.

She never tried to avoid love. Rather, she sought it out, and celebrated it in all its pain and glory. But it was a transient love that burnt itself out in its own flame, and she sought to control it, to use it to suit her own ends.

This had a far-reaching effect in a day when women were struggling for equality with men in every sphere. Hildegard Flanner says: "She gave voice to a new freedom, a new equality, the right of the woman to be as inconstant in love as the man, and as demanding of variety...It was, however, a timely statement of intellectual and biological equality, an aspect of feminism for the first time put into poetry of audacity, lyrical quality, and vogue." (see p. 19 for reference)

clipping and writing; others missed it for the reason and

wife. As yet, it is largely blank, so far as

nothing in it is so great "historical" or "political" but

in several ways the book is one of the most important

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a timely statement of individualism and biological variety,

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and, finally, equality and unity. (See p. 19 for references)

While this did not create a nation of loose women, as some horrified critics feared, it did give them a new self-confidence and assurance. Also, it opened a new literary world, in which a woman could write what she felt and thought. Harold Lewis Cook, though a man, saw the importance of this: "A Few Figs From Thistles established for their author the right to speak--more important, the right for women to speak. She won with this book an audience to whom she was to address at a later date sterner lines...no woman writer is any longer faced with the necessity of restraint(save that demanded by art) in her treatment of any subject; no woman writer need withhold the truth in presenting her physical and intellectual approach to sex." (2)

The book is saved from bitterness by her keen humor. We see it in "Grown-Up":

"Was it for this I uttered prayers,
And sobbed and cursed and kicked the stairs,
That now, domestic as a plate,
I should retire at half-past eight?"

After bragging of a love so light that it forgets by Thursday one loved on Wednesday, she admits, in "The Philosopher", that sometimes it isn't that easy:

"I know a man that's a braver man
And twenty men as kind.
And what are you, that you should be
The one man in my mind?"

1. (ref. for pl. 18) Flanner, Hildegard--"Two Poets: Jeffers and Millay" "The New Republic", Jan. 27, '37 p. 381
2. Cook, Harold Lewis--"Edna St. Vincent Millay"--in Yost's Bibliography of Millay Happers 1937 p. 16

This is the first time that a woman has been
 so honestly criticized. In this case, a new
 woman, in which a woman could write about her life and thoughts.
 It is a new book, though a man, saw the importance of this
 "The New Woman" established for their author the
 right to be--more important, the right for women to
 speak. The book with this book an audience to read and see
 address as a letter to a woman. This... no woman writes is
 any longer faced with the necessity of being silent. She has
 been heard by the world in her treatment of any subject; no woman
 can need withhold the truth in presenting her physical and
 intellectual approach to sex. (2)

The book is saved from obscurity by her own power.
 It is a "Grown-up"

What is for this I entered my
 and opened and closed and looked at the
 that was, because it was right
 I should be at the right

After reading of a love to this it is for the
 Thursday one lived on Wednesday, she was in the
 "Grown-up" that sometimes it is not that easy

"I know a man who is a lover and
 and the man is kind
 and what he said, that he should be
 the one man in my world

1. (see, for the 1st) "The New Woman" by the author
 and "The New Woman" by the author
 2. Book, "The New Woman" by the author
 "The New Woman" by the author

Yet women's ways are witless ways
 As any sage will tell,--
 And what am I, that I should love
 So wisely and so well."

Less casual, too, are the four sonnets that close the book: "Love, though for this you riddle me with darts", "I think I should have loved you presently", "Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow", and "I shall forget you presently, my dear".

Quite apart from the rest of the book are the utterly charming "Recuerdo", and the delicate "To Kathleen". Vincent celebrated the Armistice by riding back and forth all night on the ferry with John Reed and Floyd Dell(1), and she told about it in "Recuerdo".

Though we have no proof, we assume that "To Kathleen" was written to her sister. Little as we know about her, it is clear that her poet-sister's admiration for her must have been very deep, to inspire the words that:

"Beauty may not die as long
 As there are flowers and you and song."

A Few Figs From Thistles does not prove that Miss Millay was "a harlot and a nun", though it is a temptation to use her own words against her. It shows us a girl who was young enough to be delighted with her own pert wit, and naive enough to think that she could direct her emotions to suit

1. Cook, Harold Lewis--"Edna St. Vincent Millay", in Yost's
Bibliography of Millay p. 18

For woman's ways are wiser ways
As you will find out
And when you find I shall love
You wisely in my way.

That's natural, too, and the four seasons that I find
Good, for I, though I am a little bit with heart,
"I think I shall have loved you presently," "Oh, that's not
I am waiting for a year," and "I shall love you presently,
My dear."

Little about from the head of the book are the history
of the "Bears," and the "Bears," and the "Bears," and the
collected the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the
of the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"
about it in "Bears."

Though we have no more, we have the "Bears" and the "Bears"
was written in the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the
to the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"
been very good, so I have the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"

"Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"
As I have the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"

A few lines from the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"

For the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"
For the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"
enough to be the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"
enough to be the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"

A few lines from the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"
For the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears" and the "Bears"

Yet her own loss is final. She can never again hear
her friend's voice, and nothing

"Shall content my musing mind
For the beauty of that sound
That in no new way at all
Ever will be heard again."

Death itself she considers in "The Blue Flag in the Bog".
This is another fantasy, meant to be another "Renaissance".
It is far from it. The picture is horrible and dreary. The
conclusion is hopeful--that there will be a place in heaven
for the things of this earth that we love because God is
generous and kind. But the poem drags and repeats; it hasn't
the touch that is necessary to lift it out of the ordinary,
and it doesn't seem to be born of deep sincerity, as
"Renaissance" was.

Far better are the lyrics in which she puts into words again
again and again the things that she loves--the beauty that one
can enjoy, however briefly. The sea is the foremost of these.
Only those who truly love the sea themselves can appreciate
how acutely she has put into words the urgent, demanding
need to smell the salt-water and hear the pounding waves
again. Those sea-lovers can testify to the truth and beauty
of "Eel-Grass", "Inland", and the poignant "Exiled":

"Searching my heart for its true sorrow,
This is the thing I find to be;
That I am weary of words and people,
Sick of the city, wanting the sea.

.....lllll.....

The day was fine and bright. The sun shone again.

My friends were all there.

They were all very kind to me.
They were all very kind to me.
They were all very kind to me.
They were all very kind to me.

Each of them had a letter to me.

It was a letter from my mother.

It was a letter from my father.

It was a letter from my sister.

It was a letter from my brother.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my teacher.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

It was a letter from my friend.

I should be happy, that am happy
 Never at all, since I came here.
 I am too long away from water.
 I have a need of water near."

In this poem we see the exaggeration that she uses to show the very essence of an emotion. It is not true that she hasn't been happy for two years, of course. But she has been seized with an overwhelming longing for the sea, and she is feeling the desolation of having been away from it for so long. She's been missing it, in brief, sharp pangs, for two years, and suddenly those pangs have joined to make one tremendous ache. It is that powerful surge of feeling that she is expressing, and very well, too.

The other main theme of the book is love itself. She has grown beyond the point where she thinks she can direct her emotions. Now she knows that her love for someone may be transient in spite of her wishes,--and, on the other hand, she may love someone who ceases to care for her, and suffer accordingly. She insists on the reality of love, however briefly it lasts. To call it an illusion would rob it of all dignity, so in "Passer Mortuus Est" she says gently:

"After all, my erstwhile dear,
 My no longer cherished.
 Need we say it was not love,
 Now that love has perished?"

Time and suffering have brought her wisdom. She has learned that a woman can make love last longer by being careful. So, in "Elaine", she promises that the next time:

I should be happy, that is happy
I have a need of water here,
I am a long way from water,
I have a need of water here.

In this poem we see the expression that the water is
the very essence of an emotion. It is not like the sea
which has been with for two years, of course. But the sea has
always been an overwhelming longing for the sea, and the sea
feeling the possibility of having been away from it for so
long. There is been missing it, in brief, sharp, long, for
two years, and suddenly those years have joined in water one
momentous whole. It is that powerful sense of feeling
that is expressing, and very well, too.

The other main theme of the poem is love itself. The
poem grows beyond the point where the speaker has only direct
experience. Now the speaker has had love for someone very
different in spite of her wishes, and on the other hand,
and very love someone who seems to care for her, and suffer
accordingly. The speaker on the reality of love, however
bitterly it hurts. To call it an illusion would not be of any
help, so is "Passer Notturna" the story gently:

"After all, my dear little dear,
it is longer and longer
now we say it was not love,
now that love has perished."

Time and suffering have brought her wisdom. She has
learned that a woman can never love for longer or longer
careful. So, in "Passer Notturna", she promises that the next time

"I will not say how dear you are,
Or ask you if you hold me dear,
Or trouble you with things for you,
The way I did last year."

You feel that she rather resents the self-analysis that keeps her cool when she wants to yield completely to the fire of passion. She wants to love violently, and yet she knows that emotion can play painful tricks on a woman, and blind her to the truth. So in Sonnet V she says:

"Once more I renew
Firm faith in your abundance, whom I found
Long since to be but just one other mound
Of sand, whereon no green thing ever grew.
And once again, and wiser in no wise
I chase your colored phantom on the air,
And sob and curse and fall and weep and rise
And stumble pitifully on to where,
Miserable, and lost, with stinging eyes,
Once more I clasp - and there is nothing there."

Because human passions betray her into such indignity as this, she concludes, in Sonnet XII, that perhaps love of Beauty is better than mortal love, and she would be wiser to keep her heart faithful to

"The Singing Mountain's memory."

Once again, in Second April, we have the musical loveliness of her first book, which she sacrificed in "A Few Figs From Thistles" for the pithy sting of epigrams. We have, moreover, a picture of a young girl who is growing into vibrant womanhood. She is a woman of warm and passionate emotions, yet a thoughtful woman, who can view herself with

"I still not say how dark you are,
Or ask you I how bold in dress,
Or trouble you with things for you,
The way I like your."

You feel that the author means the self-analysis that
perhaps her soul, then she wants to give a reply to the time
of passion. She wants to love violently, and yet she knows
that emotion can play painful tricks on a woman, and hiding her
to the truth. So in Sonnet 130 she says:

"Once more I repeat
This truth in your standard, when I found
long since to be that just of other words
Of beauty, whether no more thing ever true,
And once again, and other in no time
I chose your words, because on the air,
And not and other and still and more and rise
and other - first only on to words,
Mistake, and lost, with shining eyes,
Once more I repeat - and there is nothing there."

Because human nature better now into such indignity as
this, the conclusion, in Sonnet 131, that perhaps love of
lovely is better than sensual love, and she would be wise to
keep her heart faithful to

"The singing Sonnet's memory."

Once again, in Sonnet 132, we have the mistral love-
ness of her first book, which she ascribed in "A Few Lines
From Elizabeth" for the story of of epigrams. We have,
however, a picture of a young girl who is growing into
vibrant womanhood. She is a woman of taste and passionate
emotions, yet a thoughtful woman, who can view herself with

cool objectivity.

The Harp-Weaver and other Poems, was a larger volume than her first three, and a climax to them. In it we see her love of drama. With unerring skill, she tells a whole story in a poem, as in "Departure", in which the last verse lends new meaning to all the rest of the poem. The very essence of intensified drama is to be found in the 8-line "Humoresque".

"'Heaven bless the babe!' they said.
What queer books she must have read?
(Love, by whom I was beguiled,
Grant I may not bear a child.

'Little does she guess today
What the world may be!' they say.
(Snow, drift deep and cover
Till the Spring my murdered lover.)"

We have a concrete expression of her love of music in "The Concert" which comes as close as anything I know to describing an aesthetic experience:

"My body will die in its chair,
And over my head a flame,
A mind that is twice my own,
Will mark with icy mirth
The wise advance and retreat
Of armies without a country,
Storming a nameless gate,
Hurling javelins down
From the shouting walls of a singing town
Where no women wait."

She won't let her lover go the concert with her, for he would come between her and the beauty of the music, but she comforts him with the promise that she will come back,

"And you will know me still.
I shall be only a little taller
Than when I went."

In her love poems we find that the transition of Second April is complete. She is no longer naive or idealistic, but realistic, and sometimes cynical. She still wants, above all else, to keep love a beautiful, glorious thing. In "Keen" she cries passionately -

"Mild we were for a summer month
As the wind from over the weirs.
And blessed be Death that hushed with salt
The harsh and slovenly years.

And I'd rather be bride to a lad gone down
Than widow to one safe home."

And in "The Spring and the Fall" -

"'Tis not love's going that hurts my days,
But that it went in little ways."

The most complete treatment of the subject that we have yet seen is in the 22 sonnets in Part III. She's trying very hard to define it. It isn't lasting. She sadly admits -

"I know I am but summer to your heart
And not the four full seasons of the year."

It may be found in sharing. In sonnet V she begs her lover to share her joy, or let her share his sorrow, and

"Let us go forth together to the spring;
Love must be this, if it be anything."

One of her best poems recognizing the transience of love is Sonnet VI, "Pity me not because the light of day," and her

"And you still know the fall,
I shall be only a little better
than when I went."

In her love poems we find the
April is surprise. She is no longer alive or idealistic, but
realistic, and sometimes cynical. She still wants, above all
else, to keep love a beautiful, glorious thing. In "Kiss"
she cries passionately -

"Kiss me here for a tender moment
in the quiet of the night,
And blessed be the night that leads with me
the heart and slowly turns
And I'd rather be led to a bed room down
than allow to one else home."

And in "The Spring and the Fall" -

"This new love's going what have we done,
but I've it want in little more."

The most complete treatment of the subject that we have
yet seen is in the 22 sonnets in Part III. She's trying very
hard to define it. It isn't lasting. She sadly admits -

"I know I am too human to your heart
And not the love that lives in the year."

It may be found in spring. In sonnet V she says her love is
share her joy, or let her share his sorrow, and

"let us go with laughter to the night;
Love must be finite, it is so changing."

One of her best poems regarding the transience of love is
Sonnet VI. "Why we not because the light of day," she says

candor is seen in the last two lines -

"Pity me that the heart is slow to learn
What the swift mind beholds at every turn."

Against the fickleness of her lover she thinks with longing of the lasting security and steadiness of the sea and the rocks. In Sonnet X she yearns to go back to the "bleak shore" that she understands, and:

"The love that stood a moment in your eyes,
The words that lay a moment on your tongue,
Are one with all that in a moment dies,
A little over-said and under-sung.
But I shall find the sullen rocks and skies
Unchanged from what they were when I was young."

She recognizes openly that what sometimes seems to be love is merely the demand of primitive sexual instincts, intense physical attraction,

"the poor treason
Of my stout blood against my staggering brain."

This sonnet, beginning

"I, being born a woman, and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind"

is one of the most challenging poems ever to come from a feminine pen. Again, and in the next one, "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why", she uses exaggeration for emphasis. She does not mean literally that she cannot remember any of the men she ever slept with, but that she has reached the point where her young, casual love affairs are part of a dim,

number is seen in the last two lines -

"Why me that the heart is slow to learn
What the swift mind beholds at every turn."

Against the likelihood of her lover and others with long-

ing of the lasting security and steadiness of the sea and the

rocks. In Sonnet 2 she returns to go back to the "dark shore"

and the uncertainty, and:

"The love that stood a moment in your eyes,
The words that lay a moment on your tongue,
Are one with all that in a moment dies,
A little over-said and under-sung.
But I shall find the sudden rocks and reefs
Unchanged from what they were when I was young."

The poem is open to the fact that sometimes seems to be love

is really the demand of primitive sexual instincts, intense

physical attraction.

"The room tremor
Of my arms fixed against my staggering brain."

This sound, beginning

"I, being born a woman, and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind"

is one of the most challenging poems ever to come from a

feminine pen. Again, and in the next one, "What time my life

have passed, and where, and why", she was expectation for

emphasis. The poem not mean literally that she cannot remember

any of the men she ever slept with, but that she has reached

the point where her young, casual love affairs are part of a dim,

delightful past, and she is regretting

"that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more."

Startling in its difference in tone and subject matter is number 22, the Euclid sonnet. She has caught a glimpse of the Absolute, the clarity and truth of higher mathematics, and she expresses this revelation in a sonnet like "a hard, white diamond among soft, small pearls."⁽¹⁾

Her "Sonnets From An Ungrafted Tree" are valuable as drama, more than as poetry. She tells, in third person, narrative sonnets, the story of a woman who stayed, through a sense of duty and loyalty, to nurse her dying husband, though she had never really loved him. Again Miss Millay shows her ability to reveal a dramatic situation in a single line.

The series is rich in images, word-pictures such as

"the flame swept up the flue,
And the blue night stood flattened against the
window, staring through."

and the clothes on the line in a snow-storm were

"Garments, board-stiff, that galloped on the blast
Clashing like angel armies in a fray."

She describes with understanding and sympathy the hopes

1. Parks, Edd Winfield--"Edna St. Vincent Millay"
"Sewanee-Review", Jan-Mar 1930, p. 45

delightful part, and she is regretting

"that summer was in me
A little while, that is all she wrote."

Searching in the distance in time and subject matter is
number 22, the third summer. She has found a glimpse of the
Aesthetic, the clarity and calm of higher mathematics, and she
expresses this revelation in a poem like "A Hand, White Dis-
tended from the Earth, Small, Pale, and Cold."

The "Sonnet from an Unfinished Poem" and "Vivante as a Poem"
more than as poetry. The title, in itself, is suggestive
of a poem, the story of a woman who stayed, through a sense of
duty and loyalty, to nurse her dying husband, though she had
never really loved him. Again Miss Wilby shows her ability to
reveal a dramatic situation in a single line.

The reader is rich in images, word-pictures such as

"The flames swept up the line,
And the time when the flames flickered against the
window, evening twilight."

and the pictures on the line in a show-stone were

"Barnacles, hoarse-voiced, that galled on the blast
Clashing like angel voices in a cry."

She describes with understanding and sympathy the hopes

A. Poem, "The Windy--" from "The Windy--" by
"Sewanee-River," January 1900, p. 23

and fears and thoughts of this woman, till when you finish the sequence she is a living woman, to be admired and pitied. But - the series lacks warmth. It doesn't compel the reader's complete attention, as her more personal sonnets do.

In this first period, also, came several plays. Two Slotterns and a King was written while she was in college, for a Dramatic Club production. It doesn't pretend to be great. Monroe calls it "an amusing bit of out-and-out foolery, a play-time exercise which no one would think of begrudging even so distinguished a poet as Miss Millay."⁽¹⁾ Actually, she had not been generally recognized as a distinguished poet when this was written, and it should not be included among her artistic works.

The Lamp and the Bell, written for a Vassar anniversary four years after she left college, is much better, but not great. It shows a good sense of drama, excellent characterization, and contains some beautiful lyric poetry. However, it has weaknesses. We are conscious of "padding", and "the constantly changing scenes and their brevity serve also to weaken the desired note of tragedy."⁽²⁾ It is better than the average play of its type, but it hasn't the note of distinction that makes a great play live through the centuries.

Aria Da Capo is a one-act-play in verse satirizing war. I truly believe that John Hyde Preston, whose criticism was

1. Monroe, Harriet - "Miss Millay in Opera" (rev. King's Henchman) Poetry, April '27 p. 43
2. Preston, John H. "Edna St. Vincent Millay" (study) Virginia Quarterly Review - July '27, p. 347

and there and thought of the woman, still with you inside the
response she is a living woman, so be satisfied and quiet. But -
the series lacks variety. It doesn't contain the reader's
complete attention, as her more personal accounts do.

In this first period, also, come several plays. Two
of them are Allegory and A King was Written which are in collage, for
a dramatic club production. It doesn't seem to be great.
Kendall calls it "an amusing bit of one-act-out-looking, a play-
that exercises which no one would think of producing even so
distinguished a poet as Miss Milly." (1) Actually, she had not
been generally recognized as a distinguished poet when this was
written, and it should not be included among her artistic works.

The Leap and the Fall, written for a Vassar anniversary
four years after she left college, is much better, but not
great. It shows a good sense of drama, excellent characteriza-
tion, and contains some beautiful lyric poetry. However, it has
weaknesses. "We are conscious of 'padding', and 'the constantly
changing scenes and their heavily serve also to weaken the
desired note of tragedy.'" (2) It is better than the average
play of the type, but it lacks the note of distinction that
makes a great play live through the centuries.

Allegory or Gapo is a one-act-play in verse satirizing war.
I truly believe that John Hyde Presson, whose criticism was

1. Kenner, Harriet - "Miss Milly in Opera" (rev. Miss King's
Henderson) Poetry, April '27, p. 43

2. Presson, John H. "Edna St. Vincent Milly" (essay)
Virginia Quarterly Review - July '27, p. 387

usually just and intelligent, was very mistaken in calling Aria Da Capo "a rather captivating but insignificant little thing which has no place in her best work."⁽¹⁾ By most of her critics it is considered to be one of the best things she ever did - a brilliant and penetrating bit of satire.

Who and what was this woman, who could be tender at one moment, and cynical the next? We know nothing of the loves she had, but we do know she must have loved. She couldn't have expressed the emotions of a woman's love as perfectly as she does from observation alone. We know she loved passionately and fully, even though she was constantly wondering just what love was.

She was intensely emotional almost purposely, it seems. She worshipped emotions as such, and was constantly trying to hold a feeling long enough to express it. It was as if her feelings were so intense she could not keep them within her; she wrote under a compulsion to share her sorrows and her delights. Untermeyer says that she "expresses that passion for identification with all of life which few poets in her generation have surpassed; she has made ecstasy articulate and almost tangible."⁽²⁾ She was, then, sensitive, imaginative, generous and vibrantly alive. These things are all that we need to know.

1. Preston, John H. "Edna St. Vincent Millay" (study)
Virginia Quarterly Review - July '27, p. 348
2. Untermeyer, Louis - Modern American Poetry - 5th Ed.

usually just and intelligent, was very kind in writing
this to me "a rather disappointing but interesting little
(1)
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Who and what was this woman, who could be kinder to one
woman, and cynical to many? We know nothing of the lives of
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wrote under a compulsion to have her art and her feelings.
Underneath says that she "expresses first passion for identity
action with all of life which few poets in her generation have
expressed; she has made steady application and a habit
(2)
"single." She was then, sensitive, imaginative, generous
and vibrantly alive. These things are all that we need to
know.

1. Practical, John W. "John W. Milroy" (study)
Virginia Quarterly Review - July 1917, p. 368
2. Underneath, Louis - Modern American Poetry - 1924

In reading the works of this first period, we have become acquainted with a woman of character and personality, of wit and humor, of thought and emotion. Have we been reading great poetry? Occasionally, yes. For the most part, however, it has been art without the great. Many of her lyrics and sonnets were and are popular without being great. They are musical as songs; they are witty and provocative. They express, beautifully and effectively, emotions that are timeless, and because of this they will be popular for years to come. Yet these emotions are not always great.

Greed, jealousy and lust are timeless emotions, but they are material for art only when they are used to show the value of and necessity for their opposites. Art is not great that justifies the ugly. Miss Millay would never have done that, but she has sometimes, doubtless unconsciously, justified weakness. She might say that she is not justifying them, but since they do exist she is expressing them. Her love poems breathe the very essence of passion and desire, and sometimes loneliness and regret. Women who have felt these emotions will catch their breath as they read and gasp, - "How did she know?" For centuries these poems will seem wonderful to them because they feel a kinship with the author. Men cannot understand this, for they haven't the sense of being one with the author that women have. This popularity, however, though it may be deeply satisfying to the author, is not synonymous with greatness.

In reading the work of this first period, we have become acquainted with a woman of character and personality, of wit and humor, of strength and emotion. Have we been reading great poetry? Occasionally, yes. For the most part, however, it has been Art without the Great. Many of her lyrics and some of her and are popular without being Great. They are musical in sound; they are witty and suggestive. They express, beautifully and effectively, emotions that are timeless, and because of this they will be popular for years to come. For these emotions are not always Great.

Great, however, and that are timeless emotions, but they are material for art only when they are used to show the value of and necessary for their expression. And is not great that justifies the title. Miss Miller would never have done that, but she has a conviction, doubtless unconsciously, justified weakness. She might say that she is not justifying them, but at the same time she is expressing them. Her love poem is beautiful the very essence of passion and desire, and sometimes loneliness and regret. Women who have felt these emotions will catch their breath as they read and gasp, - "How did she know?" For certainly these poems will seem wonderful to them because they feel a kinship with the author. How cannot they? For they have felt the same of being one with the author that women have. This similarity, however, though it may be deeply satisfying to the author, is not synonymous with greatness.

Great poems are not limited by sex or creed or race. They can be admired and understood by intelligent people, male and female. Those of Miss Millay's works which belong to this class will be discussed in Chapter V.

Great power should be used to speed on work. They can
be used and understood by intelligent people, male and
female. They are also used in many ways which belong to this
class will be discussed in Chapter V.

Chapter III: The Middle Period

The King's Henchman, The Buck In the Snow, Fatal Interview and Wine From These Grapes

In 1928 came The Buck In The Snow. This book marked an abrupt change in her writing. It is so radically different in form and atmosphere from her previous books that the reader hesitates, as if meeting a person he feels he should know, but can't quite place. Then he comes to Part IV, with its seven sonnets, and is reassured. Even here the subject-matter is new and strange, but in the deft control, the easy smoothness, and the dramatic closes are flashes of Edna St. Vincent Millay as he knows her.

Just what is so different about this book? First of all, form: for the first time Miss Millay is engaging seriously in experimentation. She uses a semi-free-verse, as in "The Bobolink". It seems to be free verse, yet occasionally a rhyme slips in as if by mistake. She experiments, too, with symbolism and a conscious mysticism. This may be a step toward the intellectual, but it seems to me that the subsequent loss of the old directness, with its attending clarity, is a regrettable loss, and not an improvement.

Her symbols are artificial ones, and the reader who does not belong to her own literary cult finds it hard to grasp her meaning. The poems are to them vague and confusing.

Sometimes one can recognize and interpret the symbol, as in

"To The Wife of a Sick Friend". In this poem she likens the life of the sick friend to a candle lighting up their world, the loss of which would leave the two of them:

"Alone, alone, in a terrible place,
In utter dark without a face,
With only the dripping of the water on the stone,
And the sound of your tears, and the
taste of my own."

The poem contains some beautiful word-pictures, but it is these pictures that impress themselves on the reader, so that he is aware of the cave that

"Glitters with frosty stalactite
Blossoms with mineral rose and lotus,
Sparkles with crystal moon and star,"

and of the dark after the candle goes out, leaving

"The inner eyelid red and green
For a moment yet with moons and roses, -
Then the unmitigated dark."

The reader is chiefly aware of these pictures, and it takes a constant effort to apply the meanings of them, and think of that "unmitigated dark" as the death of a friend, and therefore grievous and painful. As we have seen, one of Miss Millay's charms lay in her ability to express beautifully thoughts and feelings common to many. In this book she seems to be deliberately forsaking that ability. It is hard to explain this. Possibly she was trying to get away from the emotionalism that so many critics disliked.

In the change of atmosphere and subject-matter, there is perhaps a gain. No longer is she concerned with her own

"To the wild of a black night". In this poem the poet
life of the night world to a world lighting up with stars,
the scene of which would have the face of heaven.

"Along, along, in a terrible place,
In dark days with a face,
With only the dripping of the water on the stone,
And the sound of your tears, and the
Tears of my own."

The poem contains some beautiful word-pictures, and in these
pictures that impress themselves on the reader, so that he is
aware of the scene that

"Night with its terrible
Mystery with its terrible
Mystery with its terrible

and of the dark night the terrible face, leaving

"The inner world of the
For a moment you with words and tears,
Then a single word."

The poem is a study in the use of words, and it
shows a constant effort to apply the meaning of words, and
think of them "and lighted dark" as the face of a friend, and
therefore "beyond and beyond". As we have seen, one of the
poet's chief aims in his writing is to express something
thoughts and feelings common to many. In this poem the poet
to be deliberately making that quality. It is a poem to
explain that. Possibly she was trying to get away from the
ambiguities that so many critics observed.

In the change of atmosphere and subject-matter, there is
perhaps a gain. No longer is it concerned with her own

personal happiness above all else. She is concerned now with Death, what it is and what it means, and with mankind. She is distressed and angered by man's stupidity and greed. She is changing from a person whose gaze is centered inward to one whose troubled eyes are watching the world, with sympathy and interest. In this book she is in transition, and her poems are analytical rather than spontaneous, cool and hard rather than warm and glowing. Something of beauty has gone, but she has taken a step towards new depth of feeling and a broadening range of interests.

What was the course of her life between The Harp-Weaver and The Buck In The Snow? First of all her marriage. Her round-the-world honeymoon is reflected in such poems as "The Road to Avrille", "For Pao-Chin, A Boatman on the Yellow Sea," and "Memory of Cassis."

In 1926 she was asked to write the words for a score by Deems Taylor, for an American Operatta. She did it all in 10th century English, and used no words that couldn't be traced to the Anglo-Saxon. This took two years of careful study. The play itself, The King's Henchman, is not outstanding. It's an enjoyable play, but not great drama. Those two years of hard work, however, were important in the development of the newer, more thoughtful Edna Millay.

Still more important to The Buck in the Snow are the reflections from the Sacco-Vanzetti trial. We know that she

was very much affected by the case -- enough to see the governor, join a picket line, and go to jail for the sake of registering her protest. Edd Winfield Parks attributes the new tenor of her writing to it. He says, with some logic: "A mind surcharged, caught in the maelstrom, carried to the point of death, cannot easily return to lyric outbursts of love; it broods on mortality, and in the brooding, matures. Simple songs flow easily into quatrains, but poems born of intense emotional agony require a dignity of pattern in keeping with their content, a flexibility, that will allow for every shade of feeling."⁽¹⁾ He finds it a definite improvement. "The Buck in the Snow is a richer, fuller book than any of its predecessors; the emotions, though changed, glow with the same intense flame. A tragic note replaces the old joyous one; mortality and the terrible, uncontrollable machine that man has builded, society, are her chief interests: society menacing all who may endanger its peace or its dollars."⁽²⁾

This praise is a little too enthusiastic, it seems to me. The last sentence rings true, but the first one sounds like wishful thinking. The emotions do not glow with the same intense flame. Even in "Justice Denied in Massachusetts", written directly after the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, there is a lack of emotional intensity that is disappointing. The emotion is there, but again it is hidden by symbols. She

1. Parks, Edd W. - "Edna St. Vincent Millay" - (study)
Sewanee Review, Jan-Mar. 1930 - p. 45
2. Ibid

pictures the earth as blighted because injustice has been done. She envisions sunless days, empty hay-racks, fruitless trees, and she protests that we are leaving

"our children's children this beautiful doorway,
And this elm,
And a blighted earth to till
With a broken hoe."

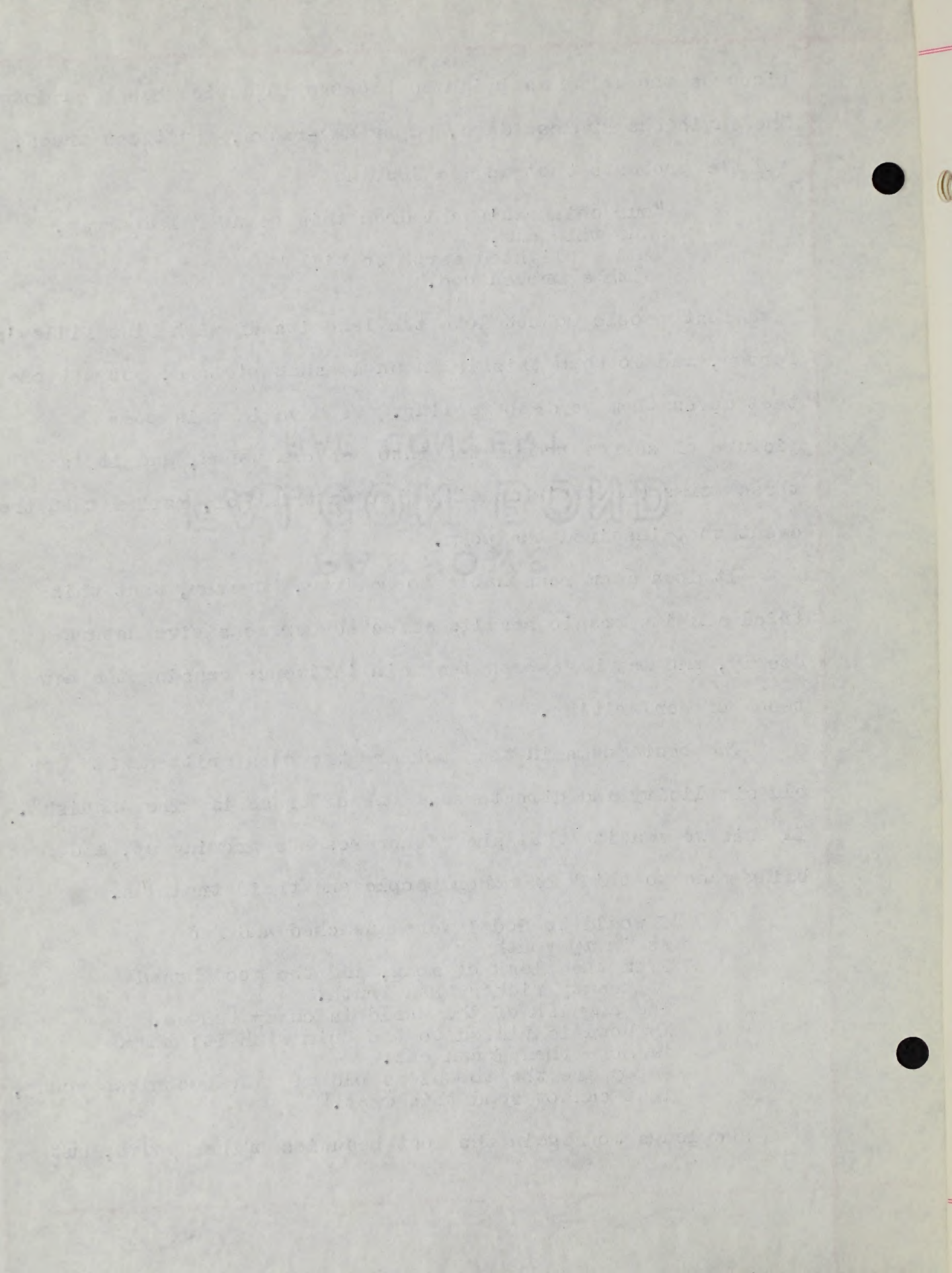
Most people do not love the land itself with Miss Millay's fervor, and to them this is an unpleasant picture, but not one that moves them to deep feeling. We have in this poem a picture of sorrow translated into her own terms, and it is these terms and their meaning that we think of, rather than the event that inspired the poem.

It does seem reasonable to believe, however, that this trial and its tragic results affected her sensitive nature deeply, and may have been the main influence causing the new tenor of her writing.

The best poems in the book are the ones written with her old simplicity and directness. One of these is "The Anguish". In this we realize that she rather resents growing up, and being made to think of other people and their troubles.

"I would to God I were quenched and fed
As in my youth
From the flask of song, and the good bread
Of beauty richer than truth.
The anguish of the world is on my tongue.
My bowl is filled to the brim with it; there
is more than I can eat.
Happy are the toothless old and the toothless young,
That cannot send this meat."

She longs to regain the lost beauties of her youth, but



she cannot, not even at the expense of pain. Nevertheless, her life is better for the loveliness she had, such as a small song

"Played on a Chinese flute".

and "the sweetness and the frost of the lost blue plums".

She remembers, too, with sadness, her beloved ocean. In "Mist In The Valley" she cries

"These hills, to hurt me more,
That am hurt already enough, -
Having left the sea behind,
Having turned suddenly and left the shore
That I had loved beyond all words, even
a song's words, to convey,

And built me a house on upland acres,
Sweet with the pinxter, bright and rough
With the rusty black-bird, long before
the winter's done,
But smelling never of the bayberry hot in
the sun,
Nor ever loud with the pounding of the long,
white breakers, ----

These hills, beneath the October moon,
Sit in the valley white with mist
Like islands in a quiet bay,

Life at it's best no longer than the sand-peep's
cry,
And I two years, two years,
Tilling an upland ground!"

One of the beauties that remains is that of music. That alone can still release her occasionally from the sorrow of the present. As in "The Concert", she tries again to tell us what it means to her in the sonnet, "On Hearing A Symphony of Beethoven",

"Sweet sounds, oh, beautiful music, do not cease!
Reject me not into the world again.

the ocean, not even at the expense of pain. Nevertheless, the
life in water for the loveless was bad, and as a result
sore.

"Played on a Chinese flute",
and the sweetness and the light of the last five years".
The water, too, with sadness, had beloved ocean. In
"What in the Valley" she writes

"These things, to hurt me more,
that I have already known,
having left the sea behind,
having turned suddenly and left the shore
that I had loved beyond all words, even
a single word, no longer,

and this is a house on a hill, across
sweet with the light, bright and rough
with the heavy black-bird, long before
the winter's done,
but a little never at the party not in
the sun,
now over food with the burning of the lamp,
with the moon, ---

These things, because the ocean moon,
is in the valley with the light
that shines in the light day,

but as it is, not so long as the same day's
day,
and two years, two years,
till the same day,

One of the reasons that makes it that of itself. This
alone can still release for occasionally from the water for the
present. As in "The Concert", she writes again to tell us what
it means to her in the end, "The Concert" is
"Gethsemane",

"Sweet enough, oh, beautiful music, do not cease!
I feel me not into the world again."

With you alone is excellence and peace,
Mankind made plausible, his purpose plain."

Even as she wishes for past beauty, she wonders about death. It isn't fearful, but it's ignominious. She hates to be conquered by something she refuses to see as important.

"Death, however
Is a spongy wall,
Is a sticky river,
Is nothing at all."

She'd rather have the most wretched of lives,

"Than go with Death,
Where nothing good,

Not even the thrust
Of the summer gnat
Consoles the dust
For being that."

This poem has been criticized as expressing a childish
(1)
fear of death. It seems to me not fear as much as anger.

It's rather sadly pathetic, for we know as well as she does that it's no use, that the case is lost before it's pled. It's a transient attitude, this rebellion against the inevitable. In her preface to Cook's essay, she says that death is to her an annoyance because it interferes with life. This attitude is expressed with more dignity, and certainly with more beauty, in "Dirge Without Music",

"Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly, they go, the intelligent, the witty, the
brave,
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not
resigned."

When Death comes, it can't be escaped, but in the mean-

With you alone in my life, my love,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

And as the years go by, my love, my home, my life,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

"But, however,
It is a long way,
It is a long way,
It is a long way."

And as the years go by, my love, my home, my life,

"But, however,
It is a long way,
It is a long way,
It is a long way."

And as the years go by, my love, my home, my life,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

This poem has been published as a collection of poems
(1) in the year 1911. It is a collection of poems.

It is a collection of poems, my love, my home, my life,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

And as the years go by, my love, my home, my life,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

"But, however,
It is a long way,
It is a long way,
It is a long way."

And as the years go by, my love, my home, my life,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

I have found the world, my home, my life,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

And as the years go by, my love, my home, my life,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

I have found the world, my home, my life,
I have found the world, my home, my life.

time she wants to live, even though life's pains are

"too chill to spell
With the warm tongue, and sharp with broken
shell
Thy ways;"

No matter what the pain, she
will cry - "So be it; it is well."

We mustn't forget that up till now Edna St. Vincent Millay has been known primarily as a love poet. The subject is not completely ignored in this book, but there are only a half-dozen poems about it.

She isn't sad about the transience of her early love, or the fact that it passed so soon. In "Cameo" she says

"O early love, unfortunate and hard,
Time has estranged you into a jewel cold and
pure;
From the action of the waves and from the action
of sorrow forever secure."

Love can't be denied, though. It goes on, transient in itself, but renewed again and again, so that it always lives. In "The Hardy Garden" she cries

"How far from home in a world of mortal burdens
Is love, that may not die, and is forever young!"

And nothing can take from her what she had. In the next-to-last sonnet, she cherishes this thought:

"But only to record that you and I
Like thieves that scratched the jewels from a tomb,
Have gathered delicate love in hardy bloom
Close under chaos, - I rise to testify.
This is my testament: that we are taken;
Our colours are as clouds before the wind;
Yet for a moment stood the foe forsaken,
Eyeing Love's favour to our helmet pinned;
Death is our master, - but his seat is shaken;
He rides victorious, - but his ranks are thinned."

time she wants to live, even though life's value is

"too small to count"

with the warm thought, and strong with thought

still
my way"

no matter what the pain, she
will cry - "no one is as well."

The woman's thought that up till now she had

been known primarily as a love poet. The subject is not

completely ignored in this book, but there are only a half-

dozen poems about it.

The first and about the prominence of her early love, or

the fact that it passed so soon. In "Canaan" she says

"O early love, mysterious and near,

time has changed you, into a jewel cold and

true;

For the action of the waves and from the action

of sorrow forever severs."

Love can't be healed, though. It goes on, persistent in

itself, but renewed again and again, so that it always lives.

In "The Hazy Garden" she writes

"How far from home in a world of mental problems

is love, that may not die, and is forever young!

And a thing can take from her what she had. In the next

to-last poem, she expresses this thought:

"But only so recent that you and I

like thieves that scattered the jewels from a bag,

have gathered delicate love in party dress

these which once, - I like to recall,

this is my testament; that we are taken;

our colours are as almost before the wind;

yet for a moment stand the two together,

spying the secret to our hearts' delight;

heart is our master, - but the heart is taken;

the river victorious, - but the river is taken."

Her anger at the stupidity and blindness of men is seen in the sonnet, "To Jesus on his Birthday",

"Less than the wind that blows
Are all your words to us you died to save.
O Prince of Peace! O Sharon's dewy Rose!
How mute you lie within your vaulted grave.
The stone that angel rolled away with tears
Is back upon your mouth these thousand years."

An undertone of sorrow, a deep concern for her fellow-men, a troubled searching for the meanings of Life and Death, and a good deal of experimentation with techniques characterize this book. Parks' more moderate conclusion seems really applicable.

"For these poems, though they lack greatness in themselves, have the inherent qualities of which great poetry is made: not only emotion, but a philosophy of life appears; the intimacy remains, but surging underneath one feels universality."⁽¹⁾

He does not venture to say what the philosophy of life is, but that would be a difficult task, for it changes a number of times. It isn't really a formed philosophy, but a search for a philosophy. The only point on which she is consistent is that there is enough of beauty in this life to make it preferable to death, no matter how much sorrow must be taken with the happiness.

Her next book, "Fatal Interview", is closer to her first period than the middle period in many ways. First of all, it's subject-matter is a return to that of her first period - love. Secondly, it is composed of sonnets, her most familiar form.

1. Parks, Edd W. - "Edna St. Vincent Millay" - (study)
Sewanee Review, Jan.-Mar. 1930 p. 46

It is a sequence of fifty-two sonnets portraying the heart and mind of a woman who is having an extra-marital love affair. Many critics are disturbed because there is no evidence as to Miss Millay's being anything but very happily married to Eugen Jan Boissevain at the time. They would prefer to have their poetry spiced with scandal. These sonnets do not need scandal, however, to give them interest. They stand on their own merits, both for interest and for form. The sequence has been ranked with the greatest sonnet sequences in literature.

In musical beauty they are superb. She has reached perfect mastery over this rather difficult form. The images are beautiful, the balance is exact, the suggestions are rich and forceful. One is aware all through them of a rich literary background. She is not a plagiarist, but she is so thoroughly acquainted with the great masters before her that she talks their language, and her many classical references seem natural and appropriate.

As to the subject-matter: it may be true that there is nothing new to be said about love, but that is partly because Miss Millay wrote Fatal Interview. No woman before her had written so freely and expressively except, perhaps, Elizabeth Barrett Browning--and she wrote about a lasting, faithful love.

It is a capsule of fifteen minutes, perhaps, the
first and last of a woman who is moving an extraordinary
style. Many critics are surprised because there is no
dance or to Miss Milly's being anything but very happy.
married to Angel and Polsevaia at the time. They would
prefer to have their poetry spiced with scandal. These women
do not need scandal, however, to give them interest. They
stand on their own merits, both in interest and in form.
The response has been packed with the greatest sound sequences
in literature.

In musical beauty they are superb. She has reached
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are so subtle, the balance is exact, the suggestions are rich
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write language, and her many musical references seem natural
and appropriate.

As to the subject-matter: it may be true that there is
nothing new to be said about love, but that is partly because
Miss Milly wrote a fatal interview. No woman before her has
written so freely and expressively except, perhaps, Elizabeth
Barrett Browning--and she wrote about a lasting, faithful
love.

Miss Millay is no longer threatening to be fickle. She knows she is going to be hurt, but she is walking into danger with her eyes wide open. Her heart cannot be ruled by conventions. She doesn't care what "people" say. Neither will she accept "counsel from the shrewd and wise". She is proud of her love, and honest in her expression of it. But she is caught by instincts stronger than her will--the age-old feminine desire to possess and control, and the instinctive feminine wiles for managing this. She is fighting to hold her lover, even when she despises herself for spoiling the glory of their love by subterfuge. The conflict between what she wants to be and what the world, and men themselves, force her to be is told again and again, but never better than in sonnet III:

"But being like my mother the brown earth,
Fervent and full of gifts and free from guile,
Leifer would I you loved me for my worth,
Though you should love me but a little while,
Than for a philtre any doll can brew,--
Though thus I bound you as I long to do."

This book will never die, for women through all time, in the glory of fulfilled love and the agony of unrequited love will turn to her sonnets, where they find her expressing their own thoughts so well. The happy ones will be delighted to share their happiness, and the less fortunate ones will be comforted by the knowledge that some woman before them has suffered the same pain.

...the village is no longer interesting to be told. She
knows she is going to be hurt, but she is waiting for danger
with her eyes wide open. Her heart cannot be ruled by con-
science. She doesn't care what "people" say. Neither will
she accept "accused" from the church and state. She is proud
of her love, and honest in her conviction of it. But she is
brought by inevitable tragedy, that man will--the age-old law--
false desire to possess and control, and the destructive
tendency of man for managing this. She is fighting to hold
her lover, even when she has to leave herself for spoiling the
glory of their love by withdrawing. The conflict between what
she wants to be and what she wants, and man himself, forces
her to be in cold again and again, but never better than in

sonnet III:

"But being like my mother the brown earth,
Perseverant and full of grace and true from grace,
I have loved me for my worth,
Though you should love me but a little while,
Then for a while I would have been--
Though thus I found you as I long to be."

This book will never be, for women through all time,
in the glory of fulfilled love and the agony of unrequited
love will find to have someone, where they find her expressing
their own thoughts so well. The happy ones will be delighted
to share their happiness, and the less fortunate ones will
be comforted by the knowledge that some woman before them
has suffered the same pain.

In this book we have our best examples of her objectivity. Caught in a flood of passion, she can still think. It is as if there were two people, the woman and the poet, and while the woman is yielding to her lover's embraces, the poet watches and says warningly, "This is physical attraction, not love," or "This means nothing to him." So she says, in II:

"I shall forget before the flickers mate
Your look that is today my east and west."

And in sonnet XLVII:

"If I had loved you less or played you slyly
I might have held you for a summer more,
But at the cost of words I value highly,
And no such summer as the one before.
Should I outlive this anguish--and men do--
I shall have only good to say of you."

This is the author of A Few Figs From Thistles grown up. She is not flip and arrogant now. She has suffered and matured. Her love is deeper, richer, and more violent. But she regrets nothing. No matter what its disadvantages, it is akin to beauty, and it is the best of life. It is greater than Time--

"When Time and all his tricks have done their
worst,
Still will I hold you dear and him accurst."

And to have once been loved is worth all the rest--

"what you cannot do
Is bow me down, that have been loved by you."

The courage and philosophical resignation that we see in this book are fine and admirable. Yet, at times, one

In this book we have our best example of her objectivity.
Caught in a flood of passion, she can still think. It is as
if there were two people, the woman and the poet, and while
the woman is yielding to her lover's embrace, the poet
watches and says wisely, "This is physical attraction, not
love," or "This means nothing to him." So she says, in III:
I shall forget before the afternoon ends
and look that is today my east and west."

and in sonnet XXIII:

"If I love, I love you less or rather, just slightly
I might have said you for a summer's time,
but at the cost of words I value highly,
and as a summer's day is one that passes,
I should I suppose with a sigh say--and can say--
I shall have only good to say of you."

This is the author of A New Life from Yesterday grown up.
She is not flip and arrogant now. She has matured and
matured. Her love is deeper, richer, and more vibrant. But
she regrets nothing. No matter what the circumstances, it is
kind to beauty, and it is the best of life. It is freedom
from the past--

"When time and all its tricks have gone their
ways,
Still I hold you dear and true as yet."

And to have once been loved is worth all the rest--

"What you cannot do
is how we down, that have been loved by you."

The calm and philosophical resignation that we see
in this book are the same attitudes. Yet, at times, the

rebells against the thing as a whole. Is it necessary for women to be ruled by their emotions? This yielding to passion and desire is human, but is it strong? Rather, is it not weak, lacking in dignity and courage? She herself feels this at times, and resents this emotion that binds her mind and narrows her horizons. In sonnet XLIV she says that if to be left were to be left alone, to study and learn, to:

"stretch the shrunken mind
Back to its stature on the rack of thought--
Loss might be said to leave its boon behind."

She has recognized that when love is the ruling element of a woman's life it narrows her, directs her thoughts inward, and absorbs her whole attention so that she can't think clearly and constructively. This is probably what lay behind Louise Bogan's criticism of the book: "These sonnets, extraordinary in execution as they were, she based on the immature impulse to experience beyond the limits of experience, to inflate the mortal passion of love into extravagant proportions." (1) And Monroe feared that she was: "denying her intellect, permitting its guiding hand to loosen its grip on the emotional life and leave passion too powerfully in control." (2)

It is dangerous business to use this book to interpret personality. The temptation is too great to apply these

1. Bogan, Louise--"Conversion into Self"
"Poetry", Feb. 1935 p. 278
2. Monroe, Harriet--"Advance or Retreat"-Poetry-July '31
p. 218

rebellious against the thing as a whole. It is necessary for
women to be ruled by their emotions? This yielding to passion
and desire is human, but is it strength? No, it is not
weak, yielding is strength and courage? The answer lies in this
at times, and perhaps this emotion that binds her mind and
her body together. In answer to the question it is to be
left alone to be left alone, to study and learn, to

"I am not the woman who
looks to the future as the end of thought--
I am not the woman who looks to the future as the end of thought."
She has recognized that when love is the ruling element
of a woman's life it narrows her, directs her thought inward,
and absorbs her whole attention so that she cannot think
clearly and constructively. This is probably what lay behind
Louise's poetic criticism of the book: "These women, extra-
ordinary in execution as they were, she based on the same
type impulse to experience beyond the limits of experience,
to diffuse the worst passion of love into extraordinary pro-
portions." (1) And Moore learned that the way: "Serving her
intellect, permitting the guiding hand to loosen its grip on
the emotional life and leave passion too powerful in her
control." (2)

It is dangerous business to use this book to interpret
personality. The temptation is too great to resist.

1. Moore, Louise--"Conversion into Self"
"Poetry", Feb. 1935, p. 375
2. Moore, Louise--"Advance on the Road"
"Poetry", July 1931, p. 375

sonnets to her directly, and search for a skeleton in her marital closet. We must not think of them as factual evidence--yet we can admit that she must have experienced the emotions she describes at some time--maybe years before. At any rate, the sequence adds another chapter to the story of Miss Millay as a person. We found that she was a sensitive and imaginative child. This proves that she became a sensitive and imaginative woman, with an inexhaustible capacity for emotional experience. She was still forthright and direct. She still worshipped beauty, and found it more worthy, because more durable, than mortal love; and memories of Maine and the sea still enriched the daily pattern of her life.

Wine From These Grapes, published in 1934, is a long drop from the emotional heights of Fatal Interview. It is more typical of this period, as first defined by The Buck in the Snow. It is as though her mind refused to be bound any longer by emotion, and insisted on stretching, seeking and having answers. It is again a book of restless searching for the true meanings of life and death and beauty.

Her experimenting, in this book, has settled to one form that has become a regular one with Millay. It is a conversational free verse, with lines of uneven lengths, and some casual rhyming. She hasn't yet mastered the form completely, and it is not as musical as it later becomes. There are many jerky and awkward lines, but there are also line of sheer

somehow to her directly, and stated for a moment in her
partial silence. The truth was that she had been
get we ourselves that she must have experienced the emotion
and described it some time before. At any rate,
his response and another chapter to the story of his life
as a person. We found that she was a sensitive and imagin-
ative woman. This proves that she had a sensitive and imag-
inative woman, with an inexhaustible capacity for emotional
experience. She was still thoughtful and direct. The still
wondering beauty, and found it more worthy, because more
humane, than mortal love; and reported of nature and the sea
still entered the daily pattern of her life.

The First Three Chapters, published in 1934, is a long
drop from the emotional heights of Island Intimacy. It is
more typical of this period, as first defined by the book
in the book. It is as though her mind had turned to the human
the human by emotion, and limited on something, seeking
and finding answers. It is again a book of realistic experience
for the true meanings of life and death and beauty.
For experimental, in this book, was called to one form
that has become a regular one with Miller. It is a novel-
section first verse, with lines of uneven length, and some
about three lines. The beauty yet mastered the form completely,
and it is not as musical as its later works. There are only
fifty and a hundred lines, but there are also lines of the

beauty, as in "Cap D'Antibes" and "The Fawn".

In this book she expresses more insistently than ever before her love for the earthy and real. It isn't the new and vivid beauties of Spring that she remembers; rather, she finds in the cool austerity of late Autumn a security and strength that are deeply satisfying:

"Bleak and remembered, patched with red,
The hill all summer hid from me."

and

"Precious
In the early light, reassuring
Is the grave-scarred hillside.
As if after all, the earth might know what it
is about."

She is still thinking of death as an annoyance, an interference. She resents the thought that

"a mortal brain
That loved to think, is clogged with dust,
And will not think again."

She never had any sense of an after-life. To her, death has always meant oblivion, the most unbearable of all endings.

There is almost nothing about love in the book. Once or twice she speaks of a love that has died, with a wistful, longing note. There is no feeling of a present passion, though. The old life has gone, and she is too disillusioned about man in general to love any one man again. She urges her spirit to:

...in "The Love-letters" and "The Love-letters".

In this book she expresses more intensely than ever before her love for the earth and life. It isn't the new and vivid pictures of Spring that she remembers; rather, she finds in the cool simplicity of life around her a security and strength that was deeply satisfying.

"Black and wonderful, painted with red,
The hills all summer and autumn red."

"Precious
In the early light, reassuring
In the grave-scented twilight,
As it often will, the earth might know what it
is about."

She is still thinking of death as an unknown, an unknown. She repeats the thought that

"a mortal brain
That loved to think, is clogged with dust,
And will not think again."

She never had any sense of an after-life. To her, death has always meant oblivion, the most undesirable of all things. There is almost nothing that love in the book. Love

on which she speaks of a love that has died, with a wish, longing after. There is no feeling of a present passion. There, the old life has gone, and she is too disillusioned about man in general to love any man again. She writes her epistle to:

"Draw from the shapeless moment
 Such pattern as you can;
 And cleave henceforth to Beauty;
 Expect no more from man."

For the most part the book is mediocre. The poems have neither polish nor the flashing sincerity of the old Millay. They are somehow ponderous and weighty, without the lift and surge they used to have. Yet there is an occasional feeling that now, at last, she is beginning to understand the meaning behind life. A gleam of this is seen in "The Return", in which a man returns to nature, man:

"Who, marked for failure, dulled by grief,
 Has traded in his wife and friend
 For this warm ledge, this alder leaf:
 Comfort that does not comprehend."

Part V of the book is the sonnet sequence called "Epitaph for the Race of Man". These eighteen sonnets are the best expression of her new writing. From the narrow and personalized theme of Fatal Interview she has gone to a theme of tremendous scope. It is the culmination of her transition. It is not perfect, but it is greater than one realizes on the first, the second, or even the third reading. Not till you have read it many times do you become aware of its strength and its meaningful implications, and its amazing vision. We will discuss it more fully in Chapter V.

This, then, is the middle period. Through its works we see Miss Millay growing up, changing from an impulsive girl seeking love and beauty to a thinking woman trying to define love and beauty.

"That it is the only way to
know the truth as you say;
and change the world to beauty;
It goes on from now."

For the book says the book is beautiful. The book says
neither good nor the thinking ability of the mind itself.
They are another point of view and beauty, with out the life and
sense of it need to have. For there is an occasional feeling
that now, at last, the is something to understand the meaning
of the life. A piece of life is seen in "The Reason", in
which a man returns to nature, and

"Who, marked for failure, called by grief,
Has strided in his life and found
For this same reason, this other fact;
Grief that does not conquer."

Part V of the book is the longest chapter called "Grief"
For the book of Man. These eighteen chapters are the best
expression of the new writing. From the narrow and personal
aligned theme of Paul Lawrence and the new form of
brotherhood scope. It is the culmination of his transition.
It is not perfect, but it is greater than the previous one. The
first, the second, or even the third reading. And still you
have read it many times to you become aware of its strength
and its beautiful implications, and the amazing vision.
We will discuss it more fully in chapter V.
The, then, in the middle period. Through the work
we see Miss Willy growing up, changing from an impulsive girl
seeing love and beauty to a thinking woman trying to define
love and beauty.

Whether or not her art is growing in proportion is a doubtful question. Certainly these books are not as popular, except for the retrogressive Fatal Interview, as her first four. This does not prove that they are not as great. It seems to me that they should not be used as a standard. They are expressions of her gradual change, and are not finished products or real examples of her possibilities. They have flashes of insight, lines touched with beauty, but only in "Epitaph for the Race of Man" does she approach the qualities of great art. This sequence has strength, intellect, and a savage beauty--and someday it may be judged her greatest work.

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except for the responsive Walt Whitman, as her first
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finished of finishing, lines touched with beauty, but only in
"light" for the face of her. Does she approach the quality
of truth? This sentence has answered, intellect, and a
savage - and someday it may be judged in greatest form.

Chapter IV: Her Latest Period

Conversation at Midnight, Huntsman, What Quarry? Make Bright The Arrows, and "Murder of Lidice"

In 1937 Edna St. Vincent Millay surprised the world with a book very different from anything she had done before--Conversation at Midnight. This book was closer to drama than poetry. It was a conversation between seven men--a Catholic Priest, a stock-broker, a short-story writer, a young advertiser, a Communist, and the host, a wealthy and cultured bachelor.

The form of it is not entirely unfamiliar to us, for she had used it occasionally in The Buck in the Snow and Wine From These Grapes. It is a conversational verse, making no attempt to follow conventional meter or rhyme-scheme. Sometimes it rhymes, sometimes it doesn't. Almost always, in spite of its long, long lines, its blunt language, and its tinge of Ogden Nash, it has rhythm; yet it is rarely what we call beautiful. Furthermore, the form is interspersed with sections of more familiar forms, such as sonnets and couplets.

The conversation ranges from hunting to politics, from women and sex to religion and philosophy, from horse-racing and bird lore to modern inventions and Communism. It is argumentative, often ribald, and sometimes philosophical.

Miss Millay's sense of humor enlivens the whole book--a stronger, more vigorous sense of humor than we have seen

before, but still directed at herself instead of others. Only this time it is not Edna St. Vincent Millay that she is mocking, but her sex as a whole. In the long analysis of women and marriage beginning with:

"They're always wanting attention, and if you don't feel like kissing them every minute of the day it's a misdemeanour"

she has exposed feminine weaknesses with diabolical accuracy, and admitted them with a wittiness and humor that win the readers' delighted admiration.

All in all, this masculine bull-session makes a fascinating, very readable book. The character-portrayal is excellent. The arguments are intelligent. But when you are finished, what have you got? As John Peale Bishop says: "But in the end we are left with merely a diversity of opinions, and there is nothing in literature that has less lasting power." (1) And another reviewer says that she has accomplished many things, but "of the pure cutting edge and organization of fine poetry they [readers] will find little evidence." (2)

It was voted the best book of poetry of 1937 by fourteen out of forty-seven critics. The second in popularity, MacLeish's Fall of the City, had four votes. (3) From this we can see that the critics liked it, but since then it has

1. Bishop, John Peale--"A Diversity of Opinions"
"Poetry", Nov. 1937 p. 104

2. "Time"--July 26, 1937 p. 69

3. "Saturday Review of Literature" April 2, 1938 p. 9

before, but still directed at the... of others.
Only this time it is not some St. Vincent thing that she
is working, but her own as a whole. In the long analysis

of women and marriage beginning with:

"They're always waiting attention, and if you
don't feel like listening they every minute of the
day it's a nuisance."

she has exposed feminine weaknesses with historical accuracy,
and directed them with a wit and humor that will give
readers a slight admiration.

All in all, this masculine anti-feminism makes a fasci-

ating, very readable book. The character-portrayal is

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finished, what have you got? Is John Paul's Bishop's

"The In and out of the left with merely a diversity of opinions."

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ization of the poetry they [readers] will find little

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1. Ball of the Girl, John Paul's Bishop's, University of Oklahoma,
"Poetry", Nov. 1937, p. 104

2. "Ball of the Girl", Ball of the Girl, p. 103

3. "Ball of the Girl", Ball of the Girl, April 2, 1938, p. 10

lost in popularity. I think that very few critics today would vote Conversation at Midnight as a best book of poetry, and certainly not as Miss Millay's best book.

One thing about it that puzzles and interests most readers is the use of the masculine view-point. For years Edna St. Vincent Millay had been labeled as a primarily feminine poet--sometimes in commendation, often in derogation. Was it an imp of defiance that made her try to speak as seven different men, and how well did she succeed?

The last question is one I couldn't answer with any certainty, and the male critics are pretty evenly divided. For example, Bishop calls it "convincingly masculine"(1), but the "Time" reviewer says that "the most feminine living poet has attempted not one but several distinct masculine idioms, with considerable charm but only here and there with success."(2)

The book does not reveal as much of Miss Millay's personality as her previous books. There is no use of the first person, and no clue to tell us which of the seven men she might be using to voice her own opinions. What it does do is give us one more bit of evidence as to her extreme versatility, both in her thoughts and her modes of expression.

In Huntsman, What Quarry?, 1939, she returned to short lyrics and sonnets. There's a renewal of the personal note,

1. See note 1, p. 51.

2. See note 2, p. 51.

lost in complexity. I think that very few critics today

would vote Conspiration At Midnight as a good book of poetry,

and certainly not as Miss Miller's best book.

One thing about it that surprises and disturbs most readers

is the use of the masculine view-point. Ten years ago it

Vincent Miller had been labeled as a primarily feminine

poet--sometimes in comparison, often in opposition. Was

it an act of defiance that made her try to speak as men

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In Conspiration At Midnight, 1935, she returned to short

poems and sonnets. There's a reversal on the personal note,

1. See note 1, p. 51.

2. See note 2, p. 51.

too, in such poems as "What Savage Blossom", "The Plaid Dress", and "Intention to Escape From Him". Yet it is a changed note. In the early books she wrote in the first person, as she does here, but it was more than that - one could feel and understand the personality of the speaker, and one unconsciously assumed the speaker was Miss Millay. In these poems, the I that speaks lacks reality, is simply a woman, any woman, a strange, anonymous woman, speaking.

Again, as in Wine From These Grapes, she finds beauty in simplicity and a stern austerity: "the steaming, solid winter roots," the snow, the sun rising over city roof-tops, the fog, and the far-off impersonal stars. She has often been accused of inconsistency, and with justice, but it would not be admirable if she clung to her first ideas and refused to grow. Besides, she has never wavered from her two fundamental beliefs - that life is enriched by the beauties of the earth, and that these beauties, for those who can see them, are enough to offset all sorrow, so that life is worth living, and much to be preferred to the oblivion of Death. It seems to me that she is expressing these things, rather than a personal love, in "Modern Declaration":

"I, having loved ever since I was a child a few things, never having wavered

In these affections; never through shyness in the houses of the rich or in the presence of clergymen having denied these loves;

Never when worked upon by cynics like chiropractors having grunted or clicked a vertebra to the

too, in each house as "The Savage Rhinoceros", "The Plain House",
and "The Rhinoceros to Rhinoceros". Yes it is a changed note.
In the early hours of the night, as the door
opens, and it was more than that - one could feel and understand
the personality of the speaker, and one unconsciously assumed
the speaker was Miss Miller. In these poems, Sir I think
again lacks reality, it is only a woman, any woman, a strange,
anonymous woman, speaking.

Again, as in From These Poems, she finds beauty in
simplicity and a serene beauty. "The evening, cold winter
poem", she knows, the sun rising over city rooftops, the fog,
and the last of the autumnal leaves. She has often been accused
of insensibility, and with justice, but it would not be
admissible if she clung to her first ideas and refused to grow.
Gentle, she has never wavered from her two fundamental beliefs -
that life is enriched by the beauty of the earth, and that
these beauties, for those who can see them, are enough to fill
out all sorrow, so that life is worth living, and must be
preferred to the oblivion of death. It seems to me that she is
expressing these things, rather than a personal love, in "Meditation":

"I, having loved even since I was a child a few
things, never having answered

In these affections; never through whimsy in
the pursuit of the rich or in the pursuit of
the unknown having failed since I was;

never when worked upon by either life or circumstance
having turned or allowed a venture to the

discredit of these loves;

Never when anxious to land a job having diminished them by a conniving smile; or when befuddled by drink.

Jeered at them through heart-ache, or lazily fondled the fingers of their alert enemies; declare

That I shall love you always.
No matter what party is in power;
No matter what temporarily expedient
combination of allied interests win the war;
Shall love you always."

Whether poetry can be propaganda, or propaganda poetry, is an old and undecided question. In Aria Da Capo Miss Millay wrote an excellent bit of anti-War propaganda, and it was also a good play. But the war poems in her last two books aren't even subtle. They lack something, something hard to define. It isn't sincerity - I believe her concern was sincere - but somehow she can't express that concern. It's as though she forgot her anguish a moment in the search for the perfect phrase, and in forgetting it, lost the ability to describe it. "Czecho-Slovakia" is good, and it's meaningful, but it is not greatly effective. One feels that any poet, with a little time and thought, could have written it. This is even more true of "Say That We Saw Spain Die."

She still has her ability to pierce to the core of things. In one of the five sonnets entitled "From A Town in a State of Siege", one of the best sections in the book, she says with a strange, fierce wisdom, that war isn't ~~so~~ bad, one can endure it, but

character of these loves:

never when anxious to land a job having finished
them by a convincing writer; or when belated by
death.

Heard at first through heart-sore, or lastly
told the history of their story; and then

That I shall love you always.
No matter what form is in power;
No matter what country is in power;
No matter what kind of interest with the world;
I shall love you always."

Whether poetry can be propaganda, or propaganda poetry,

is an old and undecided question. In this we agree with

those an excellent bit of anti-war propaganda, and it was also

a good play. But the war poem in her last two books, and

even earlier. They lack something, something hard to define.

It isn't sincerity - I believe her sincerity was sincere - but

because she can't express that concern. It's as though she

forgot her mission a moment in the search for the perfect

phrase, and in forgetting it, lost the ability to describe it.

"Theo-Slovakia" is good, and it's meaningful, but it is not

greatly effective. One feels that the poet, with a little time

and thought, could have written it. This is even more true of

"The World as Seen from the Sea."

She still has her ability to adhere to the code of

things. In one of the two books she entitled "The World as Seen from the Sea"

State of things, one of the best sections in the book, she says

with a strange, fierce clarity, that war is not, and can

endure it, but

"The worst of it is being hated and to hate;
 Perhaps if it were hurricane or flood
 That dragged us from our beds, we might await
 The shock, the twisted wreckage, and the mud
 With lighter hearts, that being not man, but Fate...
 And only friendly dogs to lap our blood."

In Wine From These Grapes, she spoke with the sad and
 imperative fury of one who tries to stop a needless suicide.
Huntsman, What Quarry? has a deeper note of sadness - the
 sadness of one who has seen tragedy fulfilled, and can see no
 hope in the future. She says in III of "Three Sonnets in
 Tetrameter,"

"Logic alone, all love laid by
 Must calm this crazed and plunging star:
 Sorrowful news for such as I,
 Who hoped - with men just as they are,
 Sinful and loving - to secure
 A human peace that might endure."

and in "Lines Written in Recapitulation",

"Yet shall I sing until my voice crack, (this
 being my leisure, this my holiday)
 That man was a special thing and no
 commodity, a thing improper to be sold."

It was Louise Bogan who said that in all Miss Millay's
 books there are some poems put there just to fill up space -
 and part III is a good example of this. There's a haunting
 charm to "Short Story", and a quick sharp beauty in "To a Young
 Poet", but utterly trivial are "The Princess Recalls Her One
 Adventure", "To A Calvinist in Bali", and the others in the
 section. They remind one very much of the type of verse one
 finds tucked in among the back pages of The Saturday Evening
Post.

...and only through the help of the ...
...the ... the ... the ...
...the ... the ... the ...
...the ... the ... the ...

In this case the ... and ...

...the ... the ... the ...

...the ... the ... the ...

...the ... the ... the ...

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...the ...

Part IV contains six elegies to Elinor Wylie. Edna Millay has always had a peculiar talent for elegies. One of the best she has written is the second of this group -

"For you there is no song....
 Only the shaking
 Of the voice that meant to sing; the
 sound of the strong
 Voice breaking.

Strange in my hand appears
 The pen, and yours broken.
 There are ink and tears on the page. Only
 the tears
 Have spoken."

The most effective comparison she ever made, and one of the **finest** tributes she could have paid, are found in "Over the Hollow Land". She describes the nightingale,

"A small bird hunched and frail,
 Whom the divine, uncompromising note
 that brought the world to its window
 Shook from head to tail.

Close to the branch, I thought, he cowers now
 Lost his own passion shake him from
 the bough.

Thinking of him, I thought of you....
 Shaken from the bough, and the pure
 song half-way through."

Part V contains eight lyrics that are closer to confessional love lyrics than anything since The Harp Weaver. The resemblance is on the surface, though. These poems are cool and impersonal compared to the flaming passion she used to express.

In the sonnets in part VI we find a summing up of her beliefs. Her acceptance of sex as a major part of love, and

Part IV contains the chapter on the "The New
has always had a peculiar talent for elegiac. One of the best
also written in the second of this group -

"For you there is no home....
Only the evening
Of the voice that went to sleep; the
sound of the evening
Voice speaking.

Someone in my hand appears
The pen, and your broken.
There are ink and paper on the page. Only
the tears
Have spoken."

The most effective comparison she ever made, and one of
the first which she could have said, are found in "Over the
Hollow Land". She describes the nightingale,

"A small bird whined and trilled,
Like the divine, music-making note
That brought the world to its window
Shook from head to tail.

Close to the ground, I thought, no other now
lost this position where the trees
the night.

Thinking of him, I thought of you....
Shaken from the night, and the pure
sunny half-way dream."

Part V contains eight lyrics that are closer to
contemporary love lyrics than anything since "The Heron's Nest".

The resemblance is on the surface, though. These poems are
cool and impersonal compared to the flaming passion she had to
express.

In the sonnets in Part VI we find a surprising use of her
beliefs. Her acceptance of sex as a joyful part of love, and

thus of life, is seen in:

"Such as I am, however, I have brought
 To what it is, this tower; it is my own.
 Though it was reared to Beauty, it
 was wrought
 From what I had to build with:
 honest bone
 It is there, and anguish; pride and burning
 thought;
 And lust is there, and nights not spent alone.

and in - "When did I ever deny, tho this was fleeting" she
 expresses her need for love -

"As God's my judge, I do cry holy, holy,
 Upon the name of love, however brief,
 For want of whose ill-trimmed aspiring wick
 More days than one I have gone forward slowly,
 In utter dark, scuffling the drifted leaf,
 Tapping the road before me with a stick."

Her feeling about death is expressed once again in "Thou famish-
 ed grave, I will not fill thee yet", when she says

"I cannot starve thee out: I am thy prey
 And thou shalt have me; but I dare defend
 That I can stave thee off; and I dare say
 What with the life I lead, the force I spend,
 I'll be but bones and jewels on that day,
 And leave thee hungry even in the end."

There is nothing new or radical in this book; just a more
 intense concern for others, and a more intense sadness at
 finding the world in chaos. Her fundamental convictions about
 Life, Death, Beauty and Love haven't changed, but it seems, that
 she has recognized her own tendency to strain an emotion too far.

The next to last sonnet expresses a recognition of her own
 growing futility, and an injunction to the coming generation:

of life, in such a

"And as I am, however, I have brought
To me it is, this power; it is my own.
Though it was needed to beauty, it

was brought
For what I had to build with:

honesty, love,
is there, and again; pride and burning

thought;
and that is there, and might not again show.

and in - "When did I ever deny, the this was I believe" the

expressed her need for love -

"As God's my judge, I do my best, help,
Upon the love of love, however brief,
"For what of whose life I have been saving with
More days than one I have gone forward slowly,
In later years, suffering the bitter pain,
Topping the road before me with a stick."

Her feelings about death is expressed once again in "The Farewell"

ed grave, I will not tell thee yet", when she says

"I cannot survive this loss; I am thy prey
And thou shalt have me; but I will defend
That I can leave thee off; and I have said
What with the life I lead, the love I spend,
I'll be but honest and loyal on that day,
And leave everything even in the end."

There is nothing new or unusual in this book; just a more

intense concern for others, and a more intense sadness at

death - the world is changed. Her fundamental convictions about

life, death, beauty and love haven't changed, but it seems, that

she has recognized her own tendency to cherish an emotion too long.

The next to last poem expresses a recognition of her own

growing frailty, and an invitation to the reader to

"Count them unclean, these tears that turn no mill,
 This salty flux of sorrow from the heart.
 I am beside you, I am at your back
 Firing our bridges, I am in your van;
 I share your march, your hunger; all I lack
 Is the strong song I cannot sing, you can.
 You think we build a world; I think we leave
 Only these tools, wherewith to strain and grieve."

Her latest complete book is Make Bright The Arrows, published in 1940. This book shows how the blackness of War can cloud even poetry, striking at its very source. Sara Henderson Hay says of it - "Mere sincerity and great concern are not enough for poetry.... For one whose earlier poetry was perfected and made both strong and beautiful, this shoddy and clichéd expression, however impassioned and earnest, is a singularly disheartening job....

"In the sonnets only, now and then, there comes through an echo of the Edna Millay who could, by magical juxtaposition of simple, scrupulous words, achieve a tremendous emotional impact. But for the most part this book sounds like someone trying to write like Edna St. Vincent Millay. It is regrettable that the author did not work over these poems. One perfect, hard-hitting lyric could have done so much more than this volume full of honest, but incoherent passion."⁽¹⁾

That Sara Henderson Hay was disappointed is easy to understand. To anyone who first loved Miss Millay for her early lyrics, watched uneasily but hopefully her growing tendencies toward propaganda, this latest book is a major disappointment.

1. Hay, Sara H. - "The New Poetry" (rev. of M.B.T.A.)
 Sat. Rev. of Lit. Feb. 15, 1941, p. 7

However, it is not fair to say that she didn't work on it. I've no doubt that she spent a great deal of time and care on these poems. They reflect, as Miss Hay said, sincerity and deep concern - and that is the key to their lack of popularity. Miss Millay is too sensitive and thoughtful a person to take war lightly, as so many of her countrymen do. Seeing the whole world torn and scarred by violence and cruelty, seeing man perfecting more and more ways to destroy man, she cannot write of beauty and love. She is impelled by a tremendous urge to wake up the thoughtless and indifferent, to shake or startle them into awareness and activity. As long as this war continues writers like Miss Millay will be affected by it, and beauty for its own sake will have no place in their writing.

An even sadder example of this is "Murder of Lidice". This was a request performance. The Writers' War Board resolved that Lidice should never be forgotten, and among other things, asked Edna St. Vincent Millay to write a poem about it. The poem is sheer propaganda, and should be criticized as such. As propaganda, it is very good. It pictures a people who belong to a strange land but are familiar in their customs, their hopes and their plans. It is stirring in its scenes of sheer horror striking at this innocent, peace-loving people.

It suffers from the same lack of spontaneity as the poems in Make Bright The Arrows. She wanted to write an inspiring poem, but the very subject-matter of war is false to her greatest talent - that of capturing beauty and putting it in

words and phrases. The poem drags and its rhythm sometimes falters. Again the pictures interfere with the poem's essential implications. It falls into clichés, and one feels that it might have been written by anyone.

In spite of this it retains some fine qualities.

It is vivid, smooth-flowing, and artistic in its vital simplicity. For the most part it's vivid and effective. We should not criticize her because it is not good poetry; we should commend her because it is good propaganda.

words and phrases. The good things and the right things
are there. Again the pictures interest the eye and the
imagination. It tells the story, and it tells that it
might have been written by anyone.

It is a little bit like the good things
it is vivid, smooth-flowing, and simple in its style.
unmistakably. For the work and its style and effective.
and it is not criticized for because it is not good poetry;
it is a good program.

Chapter V - Evaluation

We sometimes think of Art as dealing with beauty alone. This is not necessarily so. Art does, however, deal with the expression of human thoughts or feelings. True art is that which expresses itself so clearly that it carries its meaning across to the majority of people. There is a great deal of real art to be found in any fields - music, painting, or literature. Superior art, however, is not found as often.

Great art is more than a revelation of human character - it is a revelation of fine human character, or of principles vital to a fine life. The artist has flashes of insight into vital human truths, and attempts to express those flashes in a form which will reveal them permanently for everyone to see. While the final accomplishment is what counts, the understanding and appreciation of that accomplishment is sometimes facilitated by an understanding of what the author attempted. Those who criticize Miss Millay for being emotional rather than intellectual are really trying to say that she has no purpose - that she hasn't attempted anything of importance. Sometimes they are right - but sometimes they just can't understand either the attempts or the accomplishment.

There are three good standards for ⁸judging a work of art: by its physical loveliness, design, and intellectual or moral values. Other things being equal, the work of art which reveals something of value to human character will be greater than the

The conclusion which I am dealing with here is that this is not necessarily so. However, there is the expression of human qualities or feelings. True it is that which expresses itself so clearly that it carries the meaning across to the majority of people. There is a great deal of truth to be found in any field - music, painting, literature, literature, however, is not found as often.

There are more than a revelation of human nature - it is a revelation of the human character, or of principles vital to a true life. The artist has looked at things in a new human light, and attempts to express those things in a form which will reveal their significance to everyone to see. While the final accomplishment is what counts, the understanding

and appreciation of that accomplishment is essential. It is not a matter of what the artist attempted. Those who criticize him for being emotional rather than intellectual are really trying to say that he has no purpose - that the heart's intended meaning of his work. Sometimes they are right - but sometimes they just don't understand either the nature of the accomplishment.

There are also good standards for judging a work of art by its physical dimensions, design, and intellectual or moral values. When things being equal, the work of art which reveals something of value to human character will be greater than the

one which is just beautiful, or in a beautiful form attempts to justify weakness. Judging by these standards, is the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay really great art?

Has it physical loveliness? Definitely yes! This is the one point on which the critics all agree. From her first important poem, "Renaissance", she showed a superb command of language. Her writing flowed smoothly and easily, as musically as a song.

In more recent years, her writing hasn't been lovely in the sense of pretty, but it has maintained its musical power. It has become a music of harsher chords, but it is still rhythmical, and it has the beauty of power and energy, controlled by intellect.

She was familiar with literary techniques. Her words were colorful and musical. Her writing had a singing quality that couldn't be mistaken or overlooked. Harriet Monroe describes it effusively, but effectively, when she says "Thus on the most serious subjects there is always the keen, swift touch. Beauty blows upon them and is gone before one can catch one's breath; and lo and behold, we have a poem too lovely to perish, a song out of the blue which will ring in the ears of time."⁽¹⁾

"God's World" is a striking example of a poem which is the very essence of sheer, physical beauty. The scene she describes is familiar and common, but it glows with a new loveliness as seen through her eyes.

1. Monroe, Harriet - "Comment on Edna St. Vincent Millay" (study) Poetry, August 1924 - p. 264

one which is just beautiful, or in a beautiful form which is
justly famous. Indeed by these standards, is the poetry of
John Keats really great?

Now is this beautiful? Indubitably yes! This is the
one point on which the critics all agree. From her first
important poem, "The Eve of St. Martin", she showed a superb command of
language. Her writing flowed smoothly and easily, as naturally
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In more recent years, her writing hasn't been lovely in
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controlled by intellect.

She was familiar with literary techniques. Her poems were
colorful and musical. Her writing had a strong quality that
couldn't be mistaken or overlooked. Her poems were so perfect
it actively, but it actively, when she says "I think on the most
certain subjects that in always the heart, with truth, beauty
dawn upon them and in some before the sun catch their breath;
and so the world, we have a poem too lovely to perish, a song
out of the blue which will ring in the ears of time."

"God's world" is a beautiful example of a poem which is the
very essence of what, lyrical beauty. The poem is described
as familiar and common, but it glows with a new beauty as we
read through it.

J. Keats, "The Eve of St. Martin" - "Comment on John Keats, 'The Eve of St. Martin'" (London: Poetry, 1954) - p. 104

As to design - there, too, she seems to have been a finished artist from the beginning. Whether she wrote in the simple couplets of "Renaissance", the long, sweeping lines of "Interim", or the more complicated patterns of "God's World" or "Blight", she did it with assurance and ease. She made no effort, in her first period, to experiment with new forms, as so many of her contemporaries were doing. She wrote in forms that had been accepted for centuries, yet she wrote with a new freshness and vibrancy. Witter Bynner said of her in 1924, "her stanzas and sonnets seem fresher than all the technical variations of the experimentalists. She has proved that
(1)
renovation can be innovation."

The reference to sonnets is significant. The sonnet is not an easy form to handle, by any means, yet from the beginning she had mastered it. Her sonnets form a large part of her total work, and in proportion are far higher in quality than her lyrics. She has become noted as a sonneteer, and the form has become noted for having been handled by Millay. Hildegard Elanner, though she did not entirely approve, described this ability with respect and admiration in 1937: "The sonnet was ideally suited to her wants, and she surrendered herself to the iambic line and all the machinery of the form, certain to work and work so musically in her hands. Its good brevity, its psychological moments, its fine style of being a capsule of

1. Bynner, Witter - "Edna St. Vincent Millay" (analysis of poems)
The New Republic, Dec. 10, '24 (Suppl) pp.
14-15

to design - there, too, the need to have a
defined area from the beginning. Within the scope of the
article appears to "conclude", the long, sweeping line of
"Istoria", or the more complicated pattern of "Goli's world",
"Istoria", the line is with numerous and varied, the line no
attempt, in her first period, to experiment with new forms, as
no copy of her contemporaries were doing. The scope in 1924
that had been accepted for continuity, and the scope in 1924
the same as in 1924. With the German period of 1924-1925,
"Istoria" and "Goli's world" are in a sense a new beginning.
The scope of the experimentalist. The line is with the
"Istoria" can be "Istoria".

The reference to "Istoria" is significant. The concept is not
on every form to "Istoria", by any means, but from the beginning to
had remained in. Her concept from a large part of her total
work, and in proportion to the light in which she has
Istoria. The two periods noted as a concept, and the form has
become noted for having been called by "Istoria". "Istoria"
Istoria, though the line has been in a sense, a concept of
Istoria with respect and a concept in 1924. "The concept was
Istoria related to her work, and the concept was related to the
Istoria line and all the work of the line, a concept to work
and work no differently in her work. The concept, the
psychological concept, the line is a concept of a concept of

infinity, the effect of an idea ravished and made quotable, all this she was familiar with. That she was able with no hesitation to accept the continuity of a traditional form meant that she wrote in measures already possessing emotional associations for all readers. There was an exchange of gifts, for the sonnet received something from Miss Millay. She took the principle of surprise common to the final lines and developed it into a clever note of drama. She brought her own New England into the sonnet, the weeds and the weedy ocean. She gave to it, as to her other lyrics, homely and modern details and sometimes the grandeur of folk heroism.. She brought to the sonnet the interest and ferment of conversation. She made the form sophisticated, versatile, and highly feminine."⁽¹⁾

She was a poet, always, and an artist almost always, but it is the third standard we wish to know about. How often did she measure up in all ways? How often was she a great artist, and did her art advance or retreat through the years? I believe that she was always good, and occasionally achieved the great.

"Renaissance" was her first important poem, and has remained one of her greatest. This poem, written when she was nineteen, contains the quick breathlessness of revelation, the joy and excitement of youth at just being alive. Parks says of it - "In sure, simple diction a school-girl seems to grasp the harmony of the universe, with a mystical understanding,

1. Flanner, Hildegarde - "Two Poets: Jeffers & Millay" (study)
New Republic - Jan. 27, 1937 - pp. 381-2

...the first of which was ...
...the second ...
...the third ...
...the fourth ...
...the fifth ...
...the sixth ...
...the seventh ...
...the eighth ...
...the ninth ...
...the tenth ...
...the eleventh ...
...the twelfth ...
...the thirteenth ...
...the fourteenth ...
...the fifteenth ...
...the sixteenth ...
...the seventeenth ...
...the eighteenth ...
...the nineteenth ...
...the twentieth ...
...the twenty-first ...
...the twenty-second ...
...the twenty-third ...
...the twenty-fourth ...
...the twenty-fifth ...
...the twenty-sixth ...
...the twenty-seventh ...
...the twenty-eighth ...
...the twenty-ninth ...
...the thirtieth ...

with an omniscience that embraced all the joy, the pity and the suffering of life."(1)

True, on first reading the poem may seem like a bit of childish moralizing. It becomes more impressive, however, with each reading. As one reads it again and again, one becomes aware of the subtlety behind that apparent naivety. The very simplicity of it is convincing, and manages to convey, without blurring or distortion, the vision she experienced. How effectively she describes her feeling of being pressed into her very grave by the weight of the world's sufferings and wrongs. How sadly wise was this girl who cried:

"For my omniscience paid I toll
In infinite remorse of soul.
All sin was of my sinning, all
Atoning mine, and mine the gall
Of all regret."

Yet, knowing that the world is heavy with sorrow, she still cannot accept the peace of Death and oblivion. She longs for the beauties she remembers, the simple, earthy beauties, and in lines ringing with a wild, exultant joy she describes her rebirth, her return to the world. She has won from her vision not only a sense of the infinite, but a sense of the power behind all things. She no longer questions God, or doubts that he exists, for:

"O God, I cried, no dark disguise
Can e'er hereafter hide from me
Thy radiant identity!"

1. Parks, Edd W.--"Edna St. Vincent Millay"
"Sewanee Review", Jan-Mar 1930 p. 44

with an exclamation that echoes all the joy, the hope and

the suffering of life." (1)

True, on first reading the poem may seem like a bit of

childish morbidness. It becomes more impressive, however, with

each reading. As one reads it, the vision, one becomes aware

of the subtlety behind that apparent simplicity. The very sim-

plicity of it is convincing, and manages to convey, without

flourishing or distortion, the vision she experienced. For

effectively she described her feeling of being pressed into her

very grave by the weight of the world's sufferings and sorrows.

How easily also was this girl who cried:

"For my loneliness said I could
In infinite remorse of soul,
All sin was of my making, all
Atoned for, and thus the guilt
Of all released."

Yet, knowing that the world is heavy with sorrow, and

will cannot accept the peace of death and oblivion, she longs

for the death she remembers, the simple, earthly death,

and in this longing with a wild, exultant joy she described

her death, her return to the world. She was won from her

vision not only a sense of the infinite, but a sense of the

human being and his life. She no longer questions God, as

death she is asked, for:

"O God, I asked, no dark disguise
Can ever hide from me
My radiant identity?"

J. K. P., "The World's Suffering",
"The World's Suffering", London 1930, p. 42

Some people, flat-souled people, simply get along from day to day. They are not particularly happy, nor are they unhappy. They give nothing to the world by being in it. There are no high points to their lives. They live on a level. There are other people who live on a higher plane, people who live fully and splendidly. Such a person is Edna St. Vincent Millay. In the close of that first poem she gives the secret of splendid living:

"The world stands out on either side
 No wider than the heart is wide;
 Above the world is stretched the sky,--
 No higher than the soul is high.
 The heart can push the sea and land
 Farther away on either hand;
 The soul can split the sky in two
 And let the face of God shine through.
 But East and West will pinch the heart
 That cannot keep them pushed apart;
 And he whose soul is flat--the sky
 Will cave in on him by and by."

Here then, we have a great work of art. It has physical loveliness, there for all who have the eyes to see it. It has design, a very definite pattern that becomes more clear with each reading. But most important, it has intellectual meaning. It recognizes the sufferings of life, and insists, sincerely and assuredly, that they don't count against the beauty put here by God--that the man who is big enough to see this beauty will have his portion of it.

The famous Euclid sonnet is the closest she came, in her first period, to the purely intellectual. Monroe says of it: "The Euclid sonnet is a still stranger evidence of emotion

seizing upon a sheerly intellectual motive and making it blaze with poetic fire. Our language has been rich in poets, many of them college-trained in the calculus; but no man of them all has felt the icy beauty of the higher mathematics like this girl fresh out of Vassar--at least, it remained for her to express that beauty in a sonnet which attains grandeur, and which therefore outranks, in my opinion, even the most gorgeous sonnet in Fatal Interview."(1)

Her contrasting it to the sonnets of Fatal Interview shows that she recognized, even though she didn't know it by the same terms, the importance of that third standard. The sonnets of Fatal Interview are beautiful, but they glorify passions that weaken human beings. The Euclid sonnet is again a flash of insight, showing man capable of a crystal understanding of pure beauty. Because of this it does attain grandeur.

The other great piece of art in her first period is the play, Aria Da Capo. With a sure, delicate touch and an exceptional dramatic clarity, she shows, in piercing satire, the utter folly of war. Cook says it is a "devastating indictment of man's folly, his greed, his quarrels, his war-like games," and later "The movement is wholly swift, and neatly molded--a lovely filigree through which glitters a bejeweled sermon."(2.)

1. Monroe, Harriet--"Advance or Retreat?"

"Poetry", July 1931 p. 219

21 Cook, H. L.--"Edna St. Vincent Millay"--in Yost's
Bibliography of Millay Harpers 1937 p. 27

And Monroe: "The bitter symbolism of it,--searching, cruelly true, poetic--attains a lofty beauty to be compared only with the master-pieces of tragic art; yet the design is so original that one would not know with what earlier master-piece to compare it--it lives by its own right, compact, complete, and utterly of the poet's own time and race and place."(1)

Against this unhesitating acclaim are such criticisms as Preston's "a captivating but insignificant little thing", and Ransom's "prize-winning skit on the Senior Girls' Stunt Night of an unusually good year." Such criticisms indicate a casual reading of the play, that saw and immediately rejected the opening conversation of Pierrot and Columbine, so light and silly.

A very good analysis of the form of the play is given in Elizabeth Atkins' biography of Millay. As usual her praise is gushing and sentimental to the point of being silly, but the core facts of what she says about Aria Da Capo are true.

Edd Winfield Parks, in 1930, said that Miss Millay had only done these three things that could be ranked with first honors, though at all times "she was a hand-maiden to beauty, a maker of fragile jewels in fragile settings, a singer of mocking songs, of teeming life, or of homely living...a singer with a beautiful but narrow range, a violinist limited to hushed music."(2)

1. Monroe, Harriet--"Miss Millay in Opera"
"Poetry", April 1927 p. 44
2. Parks, E. W.--"Edna St. Vincent Millay"
"Sewanee Review" Jan-Mar 1930 p. 48

...in fact, it is a ...
...to ...
...the ...
...I believe it is in ...
...been ...
...of ...
...The ...
...no ...
...in ...
...and ...
...the ...
...his ...

...who ...
...the ...
...and ...
...and ...
...leaving ...
...
...his ...

...and ...
...the ...
...the ...
...A ...

...and ...
...the ...
...the ...
...the ...

Flood, fire and famine were blessings, for they made him draw nearer to his fellow-men, and

"His neighbor was his friend".

Yet he did perish from the earth. Man destroyed himself. Man fought and betrayed Man, till the race wiped itself out.

"So Man, by all the wheels of heaven unscored,
Man, the stout ego, the exuberant mind
No edge could cleave, no acid could consume,
Being split along the vein by his own kind,
Gives over, rolls upon the palm abhorred,
Is set in brass on the swart thumb of Doom."

Again in this sequence, written while the present world chaos was just beginning to form, the poet seems to have had a moment of awful vision. There's a tragic desperation in it, a desire to save Man, and a recognition that it is too late. It is a warning which she knows will go unheeded.

This time we are sure of the second and third criteria, and not the first. The sequence has form, and meaning-- has it physical beauty? That is hard to judge, for "Epitaph for the Race of Man" is modern, Twentieth Century, whereas Fatal Interview was Shakespearean. There is no effort here to make pleasing word-pictures, to use delicate imagery or musical tones. There is beauty, but it is not the vivid warmth of a 16th. Century garden, it is the power and force of a 20th. Century machine. Its language is blunt, direct, almost savage. It lashes out with the truth in searing blows. It is forceful and incisive and coldly intellectual. The

penetration of the Euclid sonnet and the bitter clarity of Aria Da Capo are combined. But to a romanticist it is harsh and ugly. Only to the mind which sees beauty in strength rather than in delicate loveliness will this sequence seem to be great art.

Since "Epitaph for the Race of Man" there has been nothing outstanding. Her art has been subordinated to a Cause--the War. Yet the very fact that she is still compelled to speak, even when she is out of her own sphere, is encouraging. It suggests that someday she may speak freely again, with clarity and charm, and the "keen, swift touch of beauty". If she does not, she will remain one of the great poets of all time for the things she has done. Even if the critics deny her greatness hundreds of years from now, the less intellectual millions will continue to read and love the poetry of the fascinating and unpredictable woman who wrote "Recuerdo", "What lips my lips have kissed", and the fifty-two sonnets of Fatal Interview. These poems may not be great art, but they will live. For what she has given us in the past, we may be grateful. As for the future, let us hope that she will become once more at least "a hand-maiden to beauty," and that after the War she will

"Forget the epitaph; take up the song!"

... of the ... and the ...
... and ...
... only to the ...
... with ...
...
... the ...
...
... the very fact that ...
... even when she is out of her own ...
... it suggests that ...
... and ...
... it is ...
... for ...
... the ...
... will ...
... the ...
... and the ...
... of ...
... for ...
... as for the ...
... will ...
... that after the ...
... "Forget the ..."

ABSTRACT OF THESIS;
EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY: THE WOMAN AND THE POET

There lies about Edna St. Vincent Millay a touch of mystery. Very little is known about her life. We have only the barest outline of facts - her childhood in Maine, on the ocean; four years at Vassar; her marriage in 1923 to Eugen Jan Boissevain, after which they both retired to the seclusion of their estate, Steepletop, in Austerlitz, New York; her interest in the Sacco-Vanzetti trial of 1927; and her more recent interest in writing war propaganda for the Allies. There are no intimate and revealing sketches, either biographical or auto-biographical. This must have been deliberate on her part, for only a woman who lived intensely and with humor could have written her poetry. There we have the key to her personality. She resented intrusion by people who were too small to understand her, yet her poet's nature demanded expression. Perhaps she felt that anyone who read her poetry would naturally sympathize with her and understand her.

Through her early, more personal writing, we come to know her as a person - a woman. We see the warm-hearted, emotional girl who loved the natural beauty, and especially that of the sea, with a passionate and naive intensity. We see a girl who was sensitive at all times to the happiness and sorrow of others; a girl who refused to be bound by conventions that didn't hold real meaning for her.

We learn that as a girl she tried to direct her emotions, to love casually and briefly. As she grew older her emotions deepened. She gloried in love, and yielded herself freely to the sway of emotion - yet she never lost a tendency for self-analysis and objectivity that enabled

her to see just what was happening. She knew that love was largely a matter of physical attraction, and could not last, and because she knew this she never really trusted in love. She sought it eagerly, but she could not believe in it completely. By the time she wrote Fatal Interview in 1931 she had learned that love cannot be controlled, and one cannot love casually, no matter how much one would like to. She had learned, too, that the conventions she rebelled against were there because the laws of nature and psychology demanded them.

One factor that added to her charm was her sense of humor. She showed, from her first writing, a readiness to laugh at her own inconsistency and her own intensity. She never laughed at others, but she often mocked her own weaknesses in a manner that is delightfully refreshing.

Her first period included Renaissance, A Few Figs From Thistles, Second April, The Harp-Weaver and Three Plays. The poems are intensely feminine and emotional, and often intimate to the point of being confessional. They are characterized, furthermore, by a sure confidence. Renaissance, ringing with exultation just for the joy of living, seems inspired by a revelation, and is written with a direct simplicity that gives it authority. The flip defiance of A Few Figs From Thistles and the challenging independence of Second April and The Harp-Weaver all show the high confidence of youth.

Her second period, containing The Buck in The Snow, The King's Henchman, Fatal Interview and Wine From These Grapes, is different in many respects. The Buck in The Snow, which contains her reactions to the Sacco-Vanzetti trial, shows decided changes in form and feeling. It breaks away from self-centered, personal poetry, and shows instead a restless urge to solve the problems of the world. No longer sure of herself, she is

wondering about the meanings of things she has always accepted - love, beauty, and above all, justice. In form she shows her first desire for experimentation.

In Fatal Interview she reverts to the feminine, the emotional, and the personal, but she is still restless, wondering now just what is right and wrong, and what is love. There is a reversion, also, in her use of her favorite form, the sonnet. Wine From These Grapes continues with the musing and philosophizing of Buck in the Snow. Any sureness she displays now comes not from the confidence of youth but from the bitter knowledge reluctantly acquired. In "Epitaph For The Race of Man", the sonnet sequence closing Wine From These Grapes, she seems to have found an answer to some of her questions, but it is an answer that she regrets - that man is causing his own downfall by his greed for money and lust for power. She sees indications of the world chaos ahead, and tries with a savage desperation to warn men - but even as she tries she knows the effort is futile. The whole keynote is one of keen despair and anger, and the language is not the clear, musical language of her early poetry, but strong and harsh and effective. It is as definitely 20th Century as some of her writing is 16th Century.

In her latest period she turns to what we call her "propaganda poetry". In "Conversation at Midnight" the propaganda is general, and there is no clue to show which of the seven conversationalists is giving her viewpoint. The form is new - a conversational verse, ranging from free verse to sonnets, and often tinged with Ogden Nash.

Still newer and more surprising is her use of the masculine viewpoint. This may have been a challenge to the critics who called her too feminine.

At any rate, it is generally admitted to be successful.

Her last three works, Huntsman, What Quarry?, Make Bright The Arrows, and "Murder of Lidice" are definitely war propaganda. The last was written at the request of the Writers' War Board. All her war propaganda poetry, though undoubtedly sincere, lacks the spontaneity and intensity that were her best characteristics. There is no help for it. She is too sensitive a person to ignore the war, but the very material is foreign to the type of musical beauty she excels in. Until this war is over, there can be no more great poetry from Miss Millay.

As for her other poetry - more often than not it has been popular, rather than great. She has put into beautiful and expressive words emotions common to women of all times, races and places. Because of this such books as Fatal Interview will always be read and loved by many.

Great poetry calls for more than that. It must have beautiful form, and design, and intellectual or moral value. By the latter we mean it must reveal something of the greatness of human nature. In Renascence, Aria da Capo, the Euclid Sonnet, and possibly Epitaph For The Race of Man, these qualifications are fulfilled. On the whole, Miss Millay is a good poet, and a beloved one, but in these works she wins a place among the great artists of literature.

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